

## An Ordinary Man

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## An Ordinary Man

This story is set in between the first and second seasons, and begins two days after the end of 'House of Luthor', and some events referred to may not make sense unless readers have seen the two-parter 'Barbarians at the Planet' and 'House of Luthor'.

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Thanks to James and Laurie for helping me out with that dialogue query! Comments are very much welcome, as usual, and may be sent to [w.m.richards@hrm.keele.ac.uk](mailto:w.m.richards@hrm.keele.ac.uk)

- An Ordinary Man -

Throwing down the tub of Rocky Road ice cream, Lois flopped back on her bed with a heavy sigh. She should be deliriously happy, now that the Daily Planet had been bought by Mr Stern and it was going to be rebuilt. Perry White, the editor, had spent much of the afternoon, after his discussions with Stern over the 'changes' the Planet's new owner had mentioned, telephoning round former employees and offering them their jobs back. Some had found alternative employment in the meantime, which wasn't really surprising given that it had been more than a month since the explosion which had destroyed the building and the newspaper which had been a second home to Lois for so many years. But others had been delighted to hear that the best newspaper in Metropolis would shortly be back in business, and were only too happy to return to the payroll.

Lois would miss those who weren't returning; Paul, the elderly sports correspondent who - unlike Perry - had been quite content to retire and wasn't about to be coaxed back to the city; Jack, who had decided

to make a new start in upstate New Troy and was returning to school; and even Cat Grant, who now worked as a senior researcher on Entertainment Today. No matter how much Lois had been irritated by Cat's continual sniping, and her deliberate flirting with Clark and other male colleagues, it would be strange not to see her around the newsroom in future.

Jimmy, on the other hand, was overjoyed to know that he would be working in the Planet newsroom again very soon. Unemployment had not been kind to Jimmy, Lois reflected, remembering guiltily that she had not been of much help to her young friend. When Jimmy had been reduced to handing out fliers for girlie shows - and worse still, had become homeless - what had Lois been doing? Planning how many cars should be able to fit into the garage of the house Lex was having built for them.

Lex. Lois swallowed, blinked and forced her brain to focus on something else.

Clark. There was Clark... now, he could easily have found another job after the Planet had closed. In the short time he had been working in Metropolis, he had built up a substantial reputation as a journalist; he was a good writer, and he had certainly had a number of scoops and front-page stories while at the Planet. Thanks to me, of course, Lois pointed out to herself, in case anyone had forgotten just what Clark Kent, Mr Greenjeans, owed to 'the best damn investigative reporter in Metropolis'. But Clark hadn't even tried to get on the staff of another paper, and had quite rudely rejected Lois's offer of a job with her at LNN, instead spending his time writing a novel. She had been very surprised, and hurt, at Clark's behaviour over the LNN job, especially considering that he'd gone on to tell her how much he missed working with her every day, missed the reporting team of Lane and Kent.

But then, he had gone on to say that he was in love with her. \*That\* had come as a shock to Lois - but, she reminded herself, Clark had insisted that she must have known. And he had been right; of course she had been aware that he had feelings for her which went beyond the label of 'colleague and friend', which was the category into which she had slotted Clark. After all, she had known that he was jealous of her relationship with Lex; the barbed remarks and sidelong glances pregnant with insinuation had made \*that\* clear enough. But that he would try to stop her accepting Lex's proposal by declaring his own feelings for her was something Lois hadn't expected.

And then, once she had rejected him, he had behaved quite childishly, Lois considered. He had refused to speak to her; he had avoided her; he had refused to attend her wedding; his manner had been stilted when she had phoned him; and when she met him in the street... okay, perhaps 'met' is stretching the truth a little, she admitted to herself - I did find out where he was going to be and I followed him... when she had met him, he had refused to get into her car, and had said some very insulting things about Lois's motives and her qualities as a journalist.

After all that, he's lucky I even speak to him! Lois thought, punching her pillow in frustration.

But the uncomfortable truth remained: Clark had been right about Lex all along. And he had also been right when he'd pointed out that Lois

should have seen it. When they had all left the scene of her abortive wedding, and Lois had managed to change out of her wedding dress (which she'd later destroyed, not being able to face giving it to charity only to have some ghoul or publicity-seeker buy the dress Lex Luthor's fiancée had intended to get married in) they had repaired to Clark's apartment. There, Perry and Jimmy had explained to Lois about all of the evidence they had managed to collect about Luthor's criminal activities: his bribes to the Planet board members, the insurance policies, the set-up which had framed Jack, and the other pieces of the complicated jigsaw which were all now falling into place about Luthor's role in a large amount of organised and violent crime in Metropolis and beyond.

Clark had been strangely silent during this discussion, but Lois had been conscious of his eyes on hers. She had felt uncomfortable about this, though, and had felt like shouting at him, 'Go on, say it, if it makes you feel better! I told you so! You were right, I was wrong.' But she hadn't said it, and nor had he; it hadn't helped that the only expression she had been able to read in Clark's eyes had been compassion. There had been something else there too, but she had been unable to identify it.

And now she and Clark would be working together again, at the Planet. Now why did that thought make her feel uncomfortable? Lois wondered. She grimaced. There were a lot of unresolved issues as far as her relationship with Clark was concerned, she realised. It certainly didn't help that it was Clark's name she had whispered to herself while dressing for her wedding, when she had been having second... and third and fourth... thoughts about marrying Lex Luthor. And there was also the fact that all she had been able to think of while walking up to the altar had been Clark: images of she and Clark together, Clark kissing her when he had briefly resigned from the Planet, the two of them laughing and hugging, Clark smiling that heart-warming smile of his. When it came down to it, Lois knew, it hadn't been Perry interrupting the ceremony with the police which had stopped her marrying Lex, it had been thoughts of Clark.

She had realised that she could not marry one man while her thoughts were only of another.

And yet... she had been prepared to marry Lex while knowing that she was in love with Superman.

"That was different!" Lois muttered aloud, angrily. After all, whatever her feelings for Superman, it had to be accepted that he wasn't exactly attainable. Unlike Clark.

But I'm not in love with Clark! she protested to herself.

Maybe not, her conscience prodded her, but you feel \*something\* for him - that much is obvious.

Yeah, well, maybe I do, but the fact remains that he \*lied\* to me about his feelings! she retorted to the little voice coming from inside her head. She shook her head, remembering that little exchange outside the Planet, just after Stern had appeared and announced that he had bought the newspaper. Lois and Clark had been standing together watching the distinctive Planet globe being taken off the back of the truck, and Clark had murmured, in that soft velvet voice of his, that he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

Lois had replied that she had just been thinking the same thing. But when she had turned to face him, she had seen his eyes focused on herself, not the truck - and the realisation had dawned on her that he had been referring to \*her\*, not the globe. In that instant, her mind had flown back to the scene outside LexCorp after her non-wedding, when her first thought had been to ask 'where's Clark?', and her first reaction, upon seeing him, had been to throw herself into his arms. He had hugged her back unhesitatingly, as if the estrangement of the previous few weeks had never happened.

That memory had encouraged her to broach the thoughts which had been on her mind since the abortive wedding. She had begun to speak, intending to remind Clark of what he had said to her that day in Centennial Park. But he had interrupted her, asking for the right to be allowed to speak first. His words had chilled and disappointed her: when he had told her he loved her, he hadn't meant it. He would have said anything to stop her marrying Lex. All he wanted was for them to be colleagues and friends. Close friends. No more.

Left feeling as if the wind had been taken out of her sails, Lois had managed to stammer out a statement that she felt the same way he did. She had then, in an attempt to rebuild their friendship, suggested that they should go for something to eat together - but Clark had 'remembered' something he needed to do, and had run off. Some friend!

But that wasn't entirely fair, she reminded herself. She had seen little of Clark in the few days since her wedding day, but Perry and Jimmy had assured her that during the weeks after the Planet explosion and fire, it had been Clark who had been most insistent on keeping going the search for evidence to convict Luthor. And he had become increasingly desperate as her wedding date had approached. He had badly wanted to expose Luthor before, not after, Lois had married him - to save her even greater humiliation, Lois thought, covering her face as she realised how it would have felt to have discovered she was married to someone capable of the villainous and criminal activities it was now known Luthor had committed.

Lois shook her head in an effort to clear her mind of these confused thoughts. She didn't love Clark; didn't have feelings for him any stronger than those for a good friend. She hoped that they would be able to resume the close working relationship and friendship which they had enjoyed before her relationship with Luthor had become serious; Clark had been a good friend to Lois over the past few months, and she had come to depend on him in ways she would never have thought possible. She wanted her friend back, and she didn't want anything more complicated getting in the way.

But there was still a nagging question in her mind: if Clark had really been lying about being in love with her that afternoon in Centennial Park, what exactly were his feelings for her? It had been apparent for a long time - since his first week at the Planet, in fact - that he found her sexually attractive, and Lois had assumed that, given the opportunity, he would have been romantically interested in her. She had been very careful to keep their relationship on a platonic level as a consequence. So in some ways, Clark remained an enigma. Could their easy working relationship survive the events of the past couple of months, Lois wondered as she stirred restlessly on the bed.

She picked up the TV remote control and flicked idly through the channels, seeking distraction. Nothing appealed; more repeats of glitzy soaps, a stupid romantic comedy movie which she'd seen several times before, mind-numbing game shows, a documentary on organised crime which, at any other time, she would have watched with interest but which in these immediate post-Lex days simply increased her humiliation, and kids' cartoons. Even the news channels couldn't hold her attention: she had not been able to bring herself to watch LNN in the few days since her wedding day, and the thought of seeing yet another item on the downfall of the third richest man in the world had kept her firmly away from other news bulletins.

I can't believe it, she thought savagely. Lois Lane, award-winning investigative journalist, can't even watch the news or pick up a newspaper! She gritted her teeth; she would have to snap out of this desire to hide away from the news. Unless she was thinking of changing careers, she would have to re-immense herself in news bulletins and papers very soon. And she really ought to be aware of the full, appalling truth about Luthor; better to read about it herself than be told by colleagues or be presented with some unpleasant new fact by a rival journalist in search of a story. She supposed that she had been lucky so far to have avoided too much media attention; that, she guessed, was largely down to Perry, who had used his influence to persuade senior colleagues in other news organisations to leave her alone for the time being. The price of this relative peace had been that she had had to issue a statement, which had pointed out that Lois, like just about everyone else in Metropolis, had been in complete ignorance of Luthor's true nature.

This hadn't completely satisfied the media, however; before she had disconnected her fax machine Lois had received several offers from the National Whisper and similar tabloids for a 'kiss and tell' story, and the city editor of the Metropolis Star had sent a courteous request, sweetened with the offer of a cash sum - not as much as the tabloids had offered - for her exclusive account of life as Lex Luthor's fiancée. She had ignored them all. If Lois ever did write her exclusive account - and she was by no means sure that she would - it would be for the Planet. She was well aware that Perry would like her to do that now that the Planet was going to reopen, though to his credit he had not even mentioned the possibility.

Well, her life was about to return to normal, so she would just have to do her best to put all the embarrassment and humiliation of the Lex episode out of her mind, Lois reflected. Perhaps writing about her experiences would help; it could be cathartic. But I don't want Clark anywhere near it if I do! she thought in an instinctive reaction. Sure, Clark had been right about Lex all along, but his negativity would not be of much help to her in dealing with her feelings.

So, back to work at the Planet as soon as Perry can get temporary printing presses and an office... that should be a matter of days, the editor had suggested. The building itself would not be ready for occupation for a couple of months, but in the meantime journalists could work from home or from the floor in one of Stern's business premises which the new owner was allocating to the Planet's editorial team. Back to the city beat, writing about crime, homelessness, corruption or excessive bureaucracy among city officials... and

Superman.

Superman... there lies another can of worms, Lois reflected with a grimace as she padded into the kitchen for a drink.

What am I going to do about Superman?

"What about him?!" she muttered. He's... not important, she insisted to herself. Not after what he had said - how he had behaved the night she had accepted Lex's proposal. It wasn't enough for him just to say he didn't love her, Lois thought as she gritted her teeth at the memory, he actually had to humiliate her and to suggest that her friendship had meant nothing to him either.

Well, he could forget little chats in her apartment in future. Or flattering stories in the Planet about how much good he was doing for Metropolis. In future, Lois was going to approach him the way a good investigative journalist should; she would \*investigate\* him. He clearly had things to hide - well, maybe it was time she exposed his secrets.

Replacing the carton of milk in her fridge, she returned to her bedroom, determined to banish the unsettling memories which refused to go away, and to concentrate on the future.

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Flying high over Metropolis, Superman scanned the city; all quiet again tonight. Too quiet for his liking, he mused with a heavy sigh: he could do with a spate of burglaries or perhaps a major disaster to occupy him for a few hours. Although that wasn't fair, he told himself quickly - how could he possibly want people's lives to be put at risk simply so that he wouldn't have to be alone with his thoughts?

He drifted downwards, and without conscious realisation found himself hovering over Lois's apartment building. Again. He scanned the apartment with his X-ray vision: she was in bed, asleep. At least she's able to sleep tonight, he reflected, feeling a little reassured: the last couple of nights when he'd checked on her in the small hours, she had been tossing and turning, or sitting up trying to read.

Clark was worried about Lois. He knew that discovering the truth about Luthor had been a tremendous shock to her - and in such a manner, having her wedding ceremony interrupted by the arrival of the police. Clark felt that it was a miracle she hadn't had a nervous breakdown, though Perry had pointed out that Lois was a very strong, determined young woman and she would be able to cope.

I don't know, Clark had thought... how would I feel if I loved someone enough to marry her, and found out right at the altar that she was a callous murderer?

But then - had Lois loved Luthor?

This was something Clark was not at all sure about. A couple of months ago, he would have laid money that Lois's feelings were not involved. He had not, at that stage, seen Luthor as a serious threat; he had suspected that Lois had simply been intrigued by the attention

of a powerful and famous man, had been curious about the lifestyle such a wealthy man enjoyed, and that she was probably using Luthor's interest in her as a means of getting close enough to get the scoop, the first exclusive interview with the head of LexCorp. Even when Lois had told him that Luthor had proposed, at first he had assumed that she was simply sharing an amusing moment. It had taken a moment or two to realise that she was actually taking it seriously, and he knew he had reacted badly. Her hackles had risen, and he had realised that he had no chance of getting her to listen to him then.

And what did he want to say to her anyway? His parents had suggested that he should tell Lois how he really felt about her; that perhaps they were by now close enough for her to see him as potentially more than a friend. He had just decided to go for it; then suddenly he was confronted with the prospect of Lois - the woman he loved - getting married to another man.

And what did Clark Kent, son of a farmer from Kansas, have to offer in comparison to Lex Luthor?

Luthor was the third richest man in the world. While Clark was reasonably well paid as a journalist at the Planet, his years spent travelling the globe had left him with no savings, and so he lived in a rented apartment in a run-down area of the city. He was now beginning to save regularly, but he earned less than Lois and so it would be some time before he could afford to buy even a small town house, let alone something grand in the suburbs.

Luthor was also the owner of a large number of companies, including LNN, one of the biggest players in the news media industry. With his contacts, Lois could go far: she could become a newspaper editor, or she could anchor a prestigious news and interview show - become the next Barbara Walters, should that be what she wanted. Whereas Clark still in many ways felt himself to be the junior partner in their working relationship, and he certainly had no interest in moving to Washington or turning to TV journalism.

So on the surface, Clark presented no competition for Luthor. But superficial appearances are just that - superficial, he had considered. He had watched Luthor with Lois, in particular on that evening when they had all been held hostage in the Planet newsroom. He had concluded that Luthor was not actually in love with Lois, but regarded her in some sense as a possession, something to be acquired. His suspicions had been confirmed when, shortly after the closure of the Planet, Lois had begun to spend almost all of her time with Luthor or under his influence. He had wasted little time in getting Lois installed at LNN, and, Clark suspected, had manoeuvred to ensure that she spent little time with her old friends from the Planet.

Luthor had wanted another beautiful ornament to add to his collection. Clark loved Lois for the warm, intelligent, funny and prickly woman she was - surely she would be able to recognise that in time?

The other issue which had troubled him greatly, once Lois had indicated that her interest in Luthor was serious, was the man's true nature. Clark had tried on several occasions to convince Lois that Luthor was not what he seemed, but she had refused to listen - accused him of being jealous. Sure, he would plead guilty to that -

but surely Lois knew him well enough to understand that he would never make things up, not about something as serious as this? Hadn't she understood that he only had her interests at heart, that even if he could never have her for himself, he didn't want to let her marry a gangster and a murderer?

But as time had passed, Lois had given every indication that she was leaving her past behind and envisaging a future with Luthor. So, in desperation, Clark had played the one card left to him: he had declared his own feelings for her in the hope that she might see beyond the superficial, might understand that it was better to be with someone who loved her with every breath in his body rather than someone who wanted to display her like a trophy.

But that had been a disaster, he remembered, shooting into flight again with a sudden burst of energy and heading out towards the Atlantic Ocean. She had seemed taken aback, and had insisted - oh, how used he was to the formula - that she cared for him, but as a friend. But he had even found that difficult to believe by then, since she had refused to understand the reason why he disliked Luthor and why he would not come to work with her at LNN. She had chosen to see his reaction as a betrayal, motivated purely by jealousy, instead of listening to what he was saying to her. And then she had stuck the knife in even further by telling him that before she actually accepted Luthor's proposal she needed to speak to... Superman.

Of course. Superman. His \*alter ego\*; his creation; the character in the Spandex suit by whom Lois had been bowled over the minute she had seen him.

Clark Kent wasn't good enough for Lois Lane; but if Superman crooked his little finger, she would come running.

That was the trump card Clark could have played, he had realised after that conversation with Lois. If he had taken her somewhere private and revealed that \*he\* was the Man of Steel, he was confident that he could have won her. His lip curled at the thought; Lois didn't want Clark, the man, but she would throw herself at his cartoon creation!

So he had been very angry when he had turned up at her apartment that evening. Angry enough to make that crass - and hurtful - comment about her robe. His conscience pricked him again, as it had done several times a day since that evening. As angry as he had been with Lois, it didn't excuse what he'd said. Even her behaviour since, during her engagement to Luthor, which hadn't exactly been perfect, did not warrant such treatment. If he ever got the chance, he mused, staring unseeingly down at the ocean beneath him, he would apologise.

But her words to him that evening... "I would love you if you were an ordinary man, living an ordinary life..." They still rankled - hadn't she, only hours earlier, rejected the 'ordinary man'? Oh, it hadn't stopped him loving Lois - nothing could do that! - but it had made him feel much less charitable towards her, which had been obvious at Perry's retirement party, and had also contributed to his manner when she had phoned him late one night a few weeks later. It had been wonderful to hear her voice, but once he'd realised that nothing had changed, that she was still with Luthor, he had felt that they had very little left to say to each other. Yet there had been many times,

in the past, when they had spoken late at night on the phone and he had felt that both of them had been reluctant to end the conversation. How had things between them got to that point?

Well, it was all over now; the wedding hadn't happened, Luthor had been exposed and was now dead, and the Daily Planet was about to re-open. Of course, no-one would expect Lois to act as if none of this had ever happened; it would take her some time to get over what had happened, how she had been duped. Clark had watched her carefully when Perry and Jimmy had gone through the evidence they had collected about Luthor's illegal activities, and he had seen the shock and pain in her expression. He had realised that it would cross her mind that he had been right all along, so he had deliberately remained silent; he had no intention of rubbing it in. For the same reason, once the discussion had drawn to a close and Lois had declared her wish to return to her apartment, Clark had allowed Perry to accompany her, confining his own activities simply to telephoning Ellen Lane at her hotel to ensure that Lois would not be alone.

He had kept away from her over the past couple of days for the same reason - and also because the memory of declaring his feelings for her and being rejected was still too fresh in his mind. Yes, it was painful, though he could live with the pain. What was more difficult to cope with was his concern about how it might affect the prospects for their friendship in the future. How could they regain the easy, close friendship they had once had in the past with the memory of Clark confessing his love for Lois always present?

So I told her I didn't mean it, Clark reminded himself as he swept over southern Europe and down towards the Mediterranean Sea. Sure, it wasn't true, he thought, but it does mean she can come back to work with me without worrying that I'm going to pester her with unwanted attentions. Which is good - but it also means that I have to carry on being good old Clark, always there when she needs a friend. Hide my true feelings from her, take care not to scare her off... pretend I don't love her.

He sighed heavily and concentrated on looking around him to find something - *\*anything\** - requiring his assistance, so that he could stop brooding over his feelings for Lois. His eye was caught by heavy smoke in the distance, somewhere in Morocco. Grateful for the distraction, he increased his speed, he swooped down towards the source of the smoke, a large and almost out of control fire in a chemicals plant.

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"Lois, honey, now I've told you you can't do this one," Perry White insisted, his tone becoming less sympathetic and more impatient as he repeated his opinion for the third time. "You are just too close to this story to be objective."

Pacing the floor of the editor's temporary office, Lois continued to gesticulate as she spoke. "Chief, just how many awards have I won for investigative journalism? When's the last time I screwed up on a story? Well?"

"Now Lois, that just isn't the point here," Perry replied, his voice becoming louder as he jabbed the air with his finger to reinforce his words. "If it was any other story, I would have complete confidence

in you. But \*not this one\*. And that's my final word on the subject."

"Perry!" Lois bit out, a lump in her throat telling her that she was close to tears with frustration and hurt. "You can't take me off this... I \*need\* to write this story!"

Perry got to his feet, a sign that as far as he was concerned the discussion was finished. "What you need and what the Daily Planet needs are two different things, Lois. I'm the editor and I make the decisions here, and if you can't accept that you know what you can do." He sighed, and waved his hand at her, beckoning her back as she was on the point of walking out of his office. "Lois, honey, we all know you've been through a rough time, and it's obvious you've still got some issues to sort out for yourself. But I can't confuse helping you with what's right for the paper. Just accept my decision on this one, okay?"

Lois stared at Perry, fists clenched at her side. Seeing that he was not going to change his mind, she whirled around and marched out of the office, making for the ladies' room. Blocking her way was Clark Kent.

"Hey Lois - watch where you're going!" Clark exclaimed, catching her arm as she almost knocked into him. He caught sight of her expression and added quickly, in a gentler tone, "Lois - what's wrong?"

Lois began to pull away from Clark, intent on getting to her destination. But a sudden thought made her pause, and she swung around to face him.

"I wanted to write up the latest development in the Luthor investigation - the proof that the link between LexLabs and the Mentamide formula went right up to Lex. But Perry won't let me - says I'm 'too close'!" She spat out the final few words.

Clark's expression was sympathetic as he commented quietly, "Lois, you know, maybe Perry's right."

"Yeah? And you are too, aren't you?" she spat at him.

"Me?"

"Yeah. After all, you always thought Lex was evil. You said so often enough. I'm only surprised that you haven't reminded me of that recently. You know - 'I told you so'?"

Clark took a step backwards, appalled at the harsh emotion in Lois's voice and the anger revealed in her contorted features. "Lois - I never would have said that to you! I'm just sorry you had to find out the way you did - I'd have done anything to spare you that suffering."

Lois stared at Clark, her anger dissolving as it gave way to the hurt and confusion simmering underneath. She blinked and stared at the floor; sensing the change in her mood, Clark took her arm and steered her, gently but swiftly, towards a darkened side office. Lowering his glasses slightly with his free hand, he checked to ensure that it was empty before opening the door and ushering Lois inside. He drew her to a chair and, as she sat, he pushed his handkerchief into her hand

and moved to stand a few feet away.

Taking several deep breaths, Lois dabbed at her eyes and then raised her chin so that she was facing Clark. Quietly, she asked, "Is everyone walking on eggshells around me because of Luthor?"

Clark nodded. "Perry gave us all a talking-to about laying off you - though most people would have left you alone anyway. To be honest, I don't think many people really had a clue what to say to you... it's not an easy situation to deal with, and no-one can possibly imagine how you must be feeling." He dropped his gaze from Lois's, feeling a little uncomfortable about raising the taboo subject of Lois's near-wedding.

Lois took in Clark's words; what he'd said certainly explained the subdued air in the temporary newsroom whenever she'd been around in the few days since the Planet has been back in business. Slowly, she asked, "And is that why you've been avoiding me?"

Clark flushed; Lois saw it at once and took it as proof of the truth of her accusation. Clark realised the conclusion she had jumped to and hurried to explain. "It's not that, precisely - I just wasn't sure whether you'd prefer to be left alone. Things have been a bit... well, difficult between us for the last couple of months."

Lois nodded. "I know, and I know it's mostly my fault. But not all... You *were* right about Luthor, and I wouldn't listen to you, but then when you started behaving coldly towards me, and wouldn't agree to come to my wedding, I was - really hurt, Clark. I'd thought that our friendship was important to both of us. But I just wasn't sure whether it was to you any more."

Clark took a step towards Lois: here, it seemed, was the opportunity they both needed to heal the hurt and retrieve their friendship. "Always," he assured her huskily. He held out his arms towards her, and she rose from the chair and allowed him to hold her tightly.

They hugged for a long moment, until Clark pulled away - not because he wanted to, but because he was afraid that if he held her for much longer his body would betray the secret of his feelings for her. Putting some distance between them, he returned to Lois's statement.

"You're right - I did behave coldly, and I'm sorry for that. It was just a very difficult situation for me, Lois - I couldn't stomach the thought of you with Luthor, knowing what I suspected about him, and I certainly couldn't socialise with him. That meant I had to keep away from you - but believe me, I never wanted to." As he spoke, he focused on Lois with an earnest expression.

She nodded, recognising the honesty in his voice, and a slight smile flickered across her features. "I just wish you'd been able to prove any of this stuff about him sooner - it could have saved us all a lot of heartbreak, and my mother wouldn't have had to have another dozen sessions with her analyst!"

Clark responded with a smile of his own, but then asked in a concerned tone, "Are you okay, Lois?"

"I will be, Clark," she assured him with more confidence than she actually felt. "It'll take some time to forget what happened, but you know Lois Lane... can't keep me down for long!"

"Well, if you're sure," he responded. "Just remember, if you ever need a shoulder to cry on, or someone to eat pizza and watch videos with, you know where I am."

"Sure, Clark," Lois answered, moving towards the door of the tiny office. "And believe me, I'm grateful. Having you as a friend really means a lot to me, you know."

Yes, I know, Clark thought silently as he accompanied her back to the newsroom. Yep, we're back to normal all right...

But he managed to give no hint of his thoughts as he asked Lois, in an apparently casual voice, how she was getting on with the series she was writing on her time as Luthor's girlfriend and fiancée. Lois confessed that she was finding aspects of it difficult, as she wrote about incidents and events from weeks earlier and put them together with what she now knew of her ex-fiance's activities. It chilled her to realise that when Lex had been wining and dining her in Paris, for instance, he had been laying his devious plans to take over, and then destroy, the Daily Planet.

"I just don't think I can be very objective about it, Clark," she admitted, realising as she spoke that this was precisely why Perry had refused to allow her to work on any other Luthor-related stories.

"I don't think Perry expects you to be objective, Lois - he wants your recollections and perceptions because of the position you were in," Clark reminded her. He hesitated, then added, "If you think it would help - if you can believe me when I say I won't try to score points - I'd be happy to have a look at what you've written."

Lois glanced up at her partner. "I know scoring points isn't your style, Clark. I think I'd be grateful for your help."

"Okay - just let me know when," he assured her, then excused himself with the excuse that he had to meet a source. As he hurried from the building, following the sound of the sirens he had just heard, Clark reviewed the discussion in his head and felt thankful that he and Lois seemed to have managed to clear the air at last. Perhaps they would be okay; their friendship, at any rate, now had a good chance of survival. And that had to be good, he assured himself.

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Returning to her apartment that evening, Lois reflected on her discussion with Clark. It was the first proper conversation they had had in months, she realised. For the first time since the closure of the Planet - perhaps even before then - there had been no pretence, no treading carefully around each other, fearful of saying the wrong thing. It had taken the enforced separation from her friends and colleagues during her engagement to Lex to make her realise just how much she needed Clark's friendship. She could never have imagined that she would miss any other human being so much. The Lois Lane who had boasted of never needing anyone in her life needed the friendship

of a farm-boy from Kansas - how she would have laughed at that proposition a year ago! Even after her sister Lucy had moved to New York, Lois had not missed her in the same way as she had missed Clark.

Just what was it about that man? Lois shook her head, trying to figure it out. After all, she thought, he's hardly street-wise - despite his globe-trotting he's still a naive country boy in many ways. He actually believes in honesty and moral values - hasn't anyone told him most people have forgotten what they mean, Lois wondered in amazement. He hasn't a cynical bone in his body, she thought wryly. And there were other things... he did seem to have something of a habit of disappearing whenever there was a hint of trouble - a coward, was he? And he could be \*such\* a patronising male chauvinist! Okay, on the surface he had no problem with women in senior positions in business - but he had a very annoying habit of thinking he had the right to 'protect' her! How often had he, when they were out on an investigation, ordered her to 'stay there'? What gave him that right? And as for the way he had behaved when she had gone undercover to investigate Toni Taylor... Lois still felt furious every time she thought about it. How \*dared\* he expose her and toss her in that dumpster? What gave him the right, not only to take over her investigation, but to be so disgustingly sexist about it? Cutting her out was one thing - Lois was honest enough to recognise that in different circumstances she might have done exactly the same thing. But to treat her as if she was some bimbo - and swiping her rear! Lois had been seriously tempted to make a complaint of sexual harassment after that incident.

But she had to concede that he had never again behaved like that, although no apology had ever been forthcoming. He had certainly irritated her with his interfering 'protective' manner from time to time, especially after the murder of Dr Winninger, but other than such occasional demonstrations of a 'me big strong man, you little feeble woman' attitude, he treated her with the respect due to a capable colleague.

And there had been many times when Lois had been grateful for his friendship - during the same investigation into Winninger's murder, for instance. They had grown very close during the year she had known Clark, and she now recognised that, of all the men she knew, he could be trusted. He had never yet betrayed a secret with which he had been entrusted. He supported her in their work, even when she came up with angles for which she knew she would have been laughed at by other colleagues. He was always there to lend a sympathetic ear or an undemanding shoulder to cry on - and it was certainly a very solid shoulder, she mused with a smile. And he never bore a grudge. He could get angry, that was true; and he would just occasionally demand his pound of flesh in terms of an apology or a concession that he had been right; but he would never withhold his friendship. Their brief exchange that afternoon had revealed to Lois that Clark's friendship for her had remained constant all the time she had been with Lex; standing on the sidelines, waiting in case - or until - she would need him. He had refused to come to watch her marry Lex, but he had been outside the LexCorp building in case she had needed him.

And Lois had certainly been grateful for the comfort of his big, strong body that day. He had looked a bit odd, she thought now in idle surprise: a little pale, lines on his face as if he was in some pain. But he hadn't hesitated to come forward when she had called for

him; and his reactions had been swift as Lex had thrown his body off the penthouse balcony and dived to his death. Clark had crushed Lois's head against his shoulder to prevent her seeing the gruesome sight of her fiance splattered over the road.

It had occurred to Lois a little later to wonder where Superman had been that day; although most of Luthor's friends and associates had gone underground quickly to spare themselves the fate of Mrs Cox, one business colleague had openly questioned why Superman had not saved Luthor. On the other hand, Lois mused, much as she regretted any unnecessary loss of life, Lex's death meant that she was spared the embarrassment and humiliation of having to testify at his trial.

Parking her Jeep in front of her apartment building, Lois scooped up the bags of groceries she had bought on her way home, and made her way inside. Perhaps she should invite Clark over for dinner and a movie soon, she considered. Okay, I'm still mad at him for that stupid 'I-love-you-no-I-don't' stunt, but... I \*need\* his friendship...

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Two days later, Clark sat at the kitchen table in his apartment, typing his current story on the laptop computer he was using until the Planet could offer him a desk and a proper PC again. His gaze flickered across to the copy of that morning's edition of the Planet, lying on the table; it was only the fourth day the paper had appeared since re-opening. Yet the newspaper was as good as ever; the print quality had not been compromised by having to use temporary facilities, and even though they were at present operating with fewer staff than previously, everyone involved in producing the paper was working as hard as possible to ensure that the Planet continued to earn its reputation for being better than all of its rivals.

As he finished his story and read over it quickly before emailing it to the editor, Clark experienced the same rush of pride he had felt the first time he had completed a story which would appear in the Planet. It was a great newspaper to work for - and he was privileged enough to work with some truly excellent colleagues, and the best editor an up-and-coming journalist could have.

His attention was suddenly caught by a news bulletin on the radio, which he had left on at a low volume. It seemed there was a hostage situation at the Lexor hotel; up to six people, including staff and guests, were held prisoner by two men with guns and a bomb. Police were currently negotiating, but as yet it was unclear what the men actually wanted.

Spinning swiftly into his Superman costume, Clark left the apartment in a blur less than a second later.

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"I need someone down at the Lexor Hotel this second!" Perry White's Southern drawl was less pronounced as his urgent shout boomed across the newsroom. "What am I running around here - a darned social club? Why isn't anyone watching the monitors?"

Lois slammed down her telephone and jumped to her feet, grabbing her

coat. "I'm on it, Chief - I was just calling my contact down at the precinct. Someone get me a cab - I'll be at the hotel in under five."

The editor grunted; it was about time Lois got back to hard journalism, he conceded, and anyway, this was a story which merited one of his best writers. All the same... "Where's Kent?" he growled?

Lois paused on her way up the ramp. "No idea, Chief - haven't seen him all day."

Jimmy hurried over. "I think he's working at home today, Chief."

"Okay, okay." The editor seemed to be thinking on his feet. "Jimmy, go with Lois - we could do with a photographer down there anyway. Now git!"

Lois stabbed at the call button on the elevator, annoyed with Perry and with everyone who was continuing to treat her with kid gloves. She was \*fine\*, for heaven's sake! Okay, she had been through a pretty traumatic time, but nothing had happened which could possibly prevent her doing her job properly. She was an award-winning journalist - why did Perry think she needed to have her hand held on a straightforward story like this?

She continued to fume during the short cab journey, responding to Jimmy's excited remarks with gruff monosyllables. At the hotel, rival reporters from TV stations and other newspapers thronged behind a police barrier; a detective Lois knew slightly was giving a briefing. Leaving Jimmy to pay off the cab driver, she hurried across, switching on her tape recorder as she ran; she listened to the officer's remarks and joined the other reporters in shouting questions.

"What are their demands?"

"Why does no-one know who they are yet?"

"How can you be sure the hostages are all still alive?"

"Are they part of some new terror group?"

"Are you calling in the FBI?"

Dissatisfied with the answers the officer was giving, Lois pushed her way forward intending to question him further. But the reporters' attention was distracted by a flash of blue and red swooping down from the sky: Superman had arrived.

Several officers detached themselves from the huddle in front of the hotel and hurried across to him. Lois stood and watched them; she felt strangely detached as she observed the Super-hero standing listening to the police explaining the situation. In days gone by, she would have experienced a thrill just from watching him, from being in his presence and hoping that he would notice her and spare her a few words before leaving. Now... now, she found herself hoping that he wouldn't see her.

Superman listened to what the police knew of the situation: where the hostages were being held, the positioning of the men holding them, the suspected location of the bomb. It didn't sound too difficult; he considered that if he could X-ray the hotel from above and confirm the existence and location of the bomb, he could probably freeze it with his Super-breath and disarm the gunmen at Super-speed before they had an opportunity to react to his presence. He put this plan to the officer in charge, and having secured agreement, he drifted upwards.

Yes... there it was. A concealed package in the office behind the reception desk.

Superman flew around to the side of the hotel and hurled himself at the window at the side of the office; it shattered and in a split second he was hovering over the bomb. Suddenly he came crashing to the floor, and he ended up in a crumpled heap of arms and legs pressed up against the desk.

Shocked and disbelieving, Superman tried to float his body off the floor... but found that he couldn't. He shook his head in puzzlement, and concentrated on the door leading to the hotel's reception area. Nothing - all he could see was painted wood.

In desperation, he brought the side of his hand down hard on top of the desk. All he got for his trouble was an aching hand.

His Super-powers had gone! And he wasn't invulnerable.

He collapsed back onto the floor, closing his eyes in horror, and failed to notice the door opening quietly, allowing a tall, thin man to observe the situation. A highly satisfied smile on his face, Nigel St John withdrew.

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Clark dragged himself into a sitting position against the wall and considered his predicament. He had no powers, and he felt weak and battered due to his fall and the pain he had managed to inflict upon himself since. His forehead felt sticky, and when he touched it his hand came away stained with blood. He was in a hotel where he was aware there were men with guns holding people hostage - and in the room with him was a bomb.

The bomb!

He crawled back towards the package he had observed from the air, and carefully lifted the cardboard box which concealed it. Underneath was a small section of tarpaulin; holding his breath, Clark lifted the corner carefully. Instead of a device with wires and explosives, he saw glowing green.

Kryptonite!

That explained the loss of his powers, Clark realised, but why wasn't he reeling in pain? Why hadn't he felt the Kryptonite as soon as he'd entered the room? He remembered his last encounter with Kryptonite very well - only a week before, on the day of the wedding, when Luthor had trapped him in a cage coated with the lethal substance. Then, Clark had felt such pain that he had barely been able to force

his body to obey any of his commands. He had been extremely lucky to escape with his life.

This Kryptonite did not have the same effect on him... but he had no powers.

Puzzled, Clark considered the possibilities. Would he regain his powers once he ceased to be in contact with the meteorite? Exactly what kind of Kryptonite was this, anyway?

He lifted the tarpaulin again, bracing himself for the waves of agonising pain he normally associated with Kryptonite. Nothing happened. He studied the lump carefully, and it dawned on him after a moment or two that this was not a piece of meteorite. Carefully, he picked up the object, and was shocked to discover that it actually felt like hard plastic, coated with some form of Kryptonite. Tapping it with his fingernail, he suspected that it was hollow. A thought struck him, and he held the glowing object to his ear. No ticking; therefore there probably had never been a bomb.

Unless he hadn't looked carefully enough, and there was a bomb somewhere else in the hotel?

But this had clearly been a trap for him, Clark knew. He wondered whether whoever had laid it was aware that \*this\* Kryptonite, however it had been manufactured or adulterated, did not seem to have the potential to kill him.

Maybe it doesn't matter to him, whoever he is, Clark considered. It's certainly neutralised me - I can't do much to stop anyone in this state.

But if I get out of here, perhaps my powers will come back, and I can do something about getting the hostages out of here!

Clark dropped the Kryptonite-coated object and stood up with the intention of making his escape through the window he had shattered only minutes before. But before he could get across the room, the door opened again and a man Clark vaguely recognised entered. He was holding a gun.

"Ah, good afternoon, Superman. I see you found my little surprise. Perhaps you would be good enough to come with me?"

Not taking his eyes, or his gun, off the Man of Steel, Nigel St John crossed the room and picked up the glowing object before escorting his prisoner out of the office.

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The large crowd now gathered outside the Lexor was becoming restless. It was more than twenty minutes since Superman had been heard crashing through the window into the hotel, and yet there was no sign of him emerging with kidnappers or hostages.

Jimmy, now standing beside Lois, had ceased taking photographs of the scene and was looking anxiously towards the hotel. "What could have happened to him, Lois? I mean, he's Superman, right? The bad guys wouldn't stand a chance against him!"

For about the fifth time, Lois answered wearily that she had no idea what was delaying Superman. However, she had to admit to herself that she was worried. Despite her assertion that she had completely gone off Superman, and that she disliked him for the way he had behaved towards her, she found herself chewing her lower lip as she waited, like everyone else, for news.

One or two reporters standing nearby began to suggest that Superman might just have decided to go home. Jimmy swung around and began to harangue them angrily. "You don't know what you're talking about! Superman's not like that! He would never leave people in danger when he could help. Just shut up, will ya!"

One reporter, a small man whose features Lois felt resembled a ferret and who did freelance work for the Whisper and other tabloids, smirked. "Well, he didn't do much for Lex Luthor, did he? That's true, ain't it, Lois? Ol' Supes never saved your Lexie-baby!"

Seething, Lois turned away, deciding that it was better not to respond than to tell that sleaze-ball exactly what she thought of him and end up on the front page of some cheap supermarket rag, or even on that night's news bulletin, given that there were TV cameras close by. As she was gritting her teeth and trying to count to one hundred in an attempt to regain her cool, she heard the sound of a scuffle, a yelp of pain, and then Jimmy's voice raised in a not-very-sincere apology.

"Oh, I'm sorry - did I hit your shin with my camera-bag? I didn't realise you were standing so close to me." Grinning, Jimmy turned back to face Lois, muttering, "That'll teach the scumball a lesson!"

Touched that Jimmy should want to come to her defence, Lois gave him a grateful smile and punched his arm lightly with her fist. "Thanks."

"You're welcome - hey, what's happening now?"

The police, who had been standing around in small groups in front of the hotel looking as confused as the press pack by the lack of developments, were now gathered in a cluster and appeared to be conferring. One, who Lois instantly recognised as Detective Henderson, then broke away from the group and walked over towards the press cordon, scanning the assembled reporters as if looking for someone.

Henderson stopped by the tape directly in front of Lois, and caught her eye. "Lois - can I have a word, please?"

Lois and Jimmy stepped forward, but Henderson frowned. "I said Lois - not you, kid."

Lois glanced at Jimmy, seeing the disappointment in his face at the prospect of being left out of a scoop. "Henderson, Olsen's working with me today."

The detective hesitated, then shrugged. "Okay. But make it quick."

Lois and Jimmy slipped under the tape and crossed the empty road to where Henderson was standing, several feet away from the remainder of the police presence. The rest of the press corps could be seen leaning forward, desperately trying to overhear the conversation.

"There's been a development," Henderson's voice was low, staccato. "The lowlife in there obviously realised they weren't going to get out alive, and they've offered to release the hostages and give themselves up."

"They have?" Jimmy was excited.

"On one condition," Henderson drawled.

"Yeah, well, there's always a condition," Lois observed sarcastically. "So why are you telling me this, Henderson?"

"Because you're the condition, Lane." The detective stared straight at Lois, a sardonic expression on his face, as he dropped the bombshell.

"What do they want?" Lois's tone was weary. She had heard it all before.

"Publicity. Their fifteen minutes of fame. A Lois Lane article on the front page of the Planet." Henderson's drawl turned cynical as he spoke. "They want you to go in and interview them about their aims before they give themselves up. They'll send the hostages out as you go in the front entrance."

"Oh sure," Lois replied dryly. "They exchange those hostages for me. And then maybe the Planet will pay a ransom."

"Don't you think we've already thought of that, Lois?" Henderson demanded. "I didn't even want to put this to you, but my superior over-ruled me."

"Well, what guarantees do you have?" Lois asked.

"None, unless you count the word of criminals," Henderson muttered sarcastically. "Look," he added in a brisk tone, "the deal seems to be like this. We tell them you'll do it, they bring the hostages to inside the front entrance. We bring you over to the door, they start to let the hostages out. We'll have you covered by police marksmen the whole time, we can have you wired with a microphone, and you'll be wearing a bulletproof vest. As the hostages are going out you go in and sit in the reception area with them - we'll be able to see you and them the whole time. Once you're through - or if you suspect anything at any time - call us and we'll be in there in seconds."

Jimmy interrupted, unable to remain silent any longer. "What the hell's happened to Superman?"

Henderson sighed. "I have absolutely no idea." He turned to Lois. "Look, if you don't want to do this I'll understand, but I should warn you that if you say no to me you'll have my boss trying to twist your arm - and Perry White's too, I guess."

"Perry would never ask Lois to do this!" Jimmy exclaimed.

"Maybe he wouldn't - but think of the exclusive!" Lois pointed out, already excited at the thought of another award-winning story. She turned to Henderson. "I'll do it."

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Clark followed his captor's directions and walked into the hotel's bar, limping slightly from a painfully twisted ankle, noting as they went how careful St John was to ensure that they could not be seen from outside the hotel. He had considered making a run for it, regardless of the knowledge that he risked being shot at; even without his Super-powers and despite his throbbing ankle, Clark still reckoned he could move pretty fast. But he also wanted to know what was going on, and he also considered it likely that if he gave the appearance of surrendering, the hostages might be released. After all, it was now clear that the whole elaborate set-up had been a trap for Superman; now that Superman had been caught, the hostages were clearly superfluous.

Clark had realised the identity of his captor shortly after being ushered out of the office: the Oxford-educated, English accent of Lex Luthor's personal assistant was very distinctive. And it was all beginning to make sense: apart from Jason Trask, who was dead, as far as Clark was aware the only person who had possessed Kryptonite was Lex Luthor - who, Clark had guessed, had acquired the piece which had been sent for analysis by Wayne Irig and had been stolen.

So this probably explained the disappearance of the Kryptonite cage from the basement of the LexCorp headquarters, Clark realised. He had returned the following day with his father - with great caution, of course - intending to have Jonathan take away the cage and destroy it. But it had vanished, and there had been no sign of Superman's involuntary occupation the previous day.

What did Nigel want with Superman? The same thing Luthor had - to kill him? Clark wondered. If so, why not simply shoot him in the office? He had no powers; an ordinary bullet would end his life instantly.

Clark considered the possible ways out of the situation. Even without powers, he ought to have considerable advantages over St John. He was close to forty years younger than the older man; he was also heavier, if not taller; and he could have the advantage of surprise. Certainly St John had the advantage of being in possession of a gun; but if Clark could act swiftly enough, he could disarm his captor. He thought through several scenarios as they entered the bar; he could spin around and use a karate-chop movement to send the gun flying, or perhaps he could imitate one of Lois's favourite movements and kick the weapon out of St John's hand.

He was still considering the possibilities when St John pushed him against a heavy stool next to the bar counter and caught his arms in a surprisingly tight grip. Clark cursed his stupidity in not acting sooner as he felt his wrists secured behind his back by what felt like handcuffs.

"You won't get away with this, St John - do you honestly think you

can keep me here?" he gritted out, more in false bravado than any real sense of optimism. Lex's former henchman simply smiled in genuine amusement.

"Oh, I think so, \*Super\*man - after all, you won't get very far without any Super-powers, will you?" St John carefully placed the Kryptonite-plastic on the bar before leaving the room.

Grimacing, Clark tried to move but discovered that the handcuffs had been secured to the counter at the edge of the bar, which seemed to be constructed of steel - damn these contemporary designers, he thought in frustration. He was trapped, and with the Kryptonite nearby there was no chance of him regaining his powers within the short term. Well, it looked as if he would have to stick around to discover exactly what St John wanted with him.

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The hostages, looking very relieved to be escaping unhurt, were filing out of the hotel one by one. Lois stood by the entrance, feeling very bulky as a result of the vest and electronic devices she was wearing. Jimmy was a few feet behind her, snapping pictures of the hostages as they emerged; he caught her eye and mouthed "Good luck!" at her.

Finally, the police gave the 'all clear' and Lois walked through the large plate-glass entrance. A man who Lois presumed was one of the kidnappers stood just the other side of the door; he held a pistol in his hand as if in readiness. He beckoned her to come further in, away from the door; she obeyed, conscious of the need to remain visible from the outside.

Suddenly the man produced what looked like a remote-control device, and steel shutters dropped from the ceiling to cover the entrance completely. There were shouts from outside as the police tried to react; a couple of shots were heard, followed by a voice - Henderson, thought Lois - yelling "Hold your fire! Lois Lane's still in there!" As she tried to adjust her eyes to the lack of light, Lois felt her arm seized in a tight grip.

"All right, hold her there," a smooth voice drawled. Lois recognised it instantly.

"Nigel St John!" she gasped in shock. Then, regaining her composure, she tossed her head and added sarcastically, "I wondered what rat-hole you'd crawled into after Lex Luthor fell from grace - literally."

"Well, now you know, Miss Lane. The same rat-hole you are about to inhabit." He would make a point of calling me 'Miss' rather than 'Ms', Lois thought inconsequentially. St John crossed the foyer and stood next to her, covering her with the gun he held in his hand. He held it to the back of her head and said in an aside to his accomplice, "Search her."

Lois's cashmere jacket was pulled off by the other man; she gritted her teeth and refrained from protesting, although it was one of the most expensive items of clothing she owned. The bulletproof vest was found and ripped off, to reveal the microphone and wiring, which was quickly disconnected and thrown to the floor. Lois felt some secret

satisfaction in knowing that at least the police were aware of the identity of her captor.

"Now, Ms Lane, come this way if you please," St John announced smoothly, gesturing across the foyer with his gun. Conceding that she had little choice, Lois followed him; his accomplice walked just behind her, keeping his gun trained on her.

In the bar, Clark swung his head around as he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He had heard the sound of voices and several footsteps, followed by the clatter of the shutters closing and had wondered what was going on; not being in any position to find out was frustrating. This business of being without powers was a darn nuisance, he considered, quite apart from the danger he seemed to be in.

He watched St John re-enter the bar and was about to demand an explanation, when he noticed St John's companions. Clark groaned silently; *\*why\** did Lois have to get involved in this? Why now, when he could do nothing to help her?

Lois, how the hell am I going to get us out of this? he asked himself in silent frustration.

Lois had been equally taken aback on seeing Superman; it certainly explained why he had failed to return from his rescue mission. But why was he just leaning against that stool in front of the bar? Why wasn't he capturing St John and his accomplice and getting himself and Lois out of there? What was he up to?

And what was that on his forehead... it looked like blood. *\*But Superman doesn't bleed!\** Lois thought in horror.

Her questions were answered when her eye was caught by the green glow on the bar. That had to be Kryptonite! Trask had believed that it could kill Superman; that assertion had never been proven, but here was the Man of Steel, apparently a helpless, battered prisoner.

And if he's helpless, then what chance do we have of getting out of this alive? Lois wondered.

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Outside the hotel, pandemonium had broken out. Members of the press corps were yelling questions at the police, demanding to know why the hostages had been released, where Lois Lane had gone, and why the shutters had come down like that. And where was Superman?

Henderson was shouting into his mobile phone. "Look, I'm telling you, I want the FBI down here, I want armoured cars and a dozen marksmen. There's a woman's life at stake, and Nigel St John is a dangerous fugitive!"

Other officers were shouting accusations at each other, none of them wanting to take the blame for the fiasco which had resulted in an award-winning reporter being taken hostage in a situation where it was now almost impossible to get into the hotel. Perry White had been informed of the situation by a frantic Jimmy Olsen, and he had already been on the phone to the Chief of Police, threatening to run a hostile front page and editorial in the evening edition unless Lois

Lane was rescued, in one piece, in the very near future. And there was also the small matter of the bomb which the gunmen had originally claimed was inside the hotel - nothing further had been said about that. Was it still there? And when was it likely to explode?

Jimmy stood some way apart from the various groups of people. As soon as the shutters had descended, he had been ordered away from the front of the hotel by the police. He hadn't wanted to return to his press colleagues, however; he couldn't face being inundated with questions from other reporters about exactly what was supposed to have happened. He was worried sick about Lois; he had heard enough to realise just who her captor was, and was also aware that the police had lost radio contact with her. He had guessed from snippets he'd overheard that she was no longer wearing her bulletproof vest. He stared at the ground beneath his feet as he admitted to himself that Lois would be very lucky to escape with her life.

The sound of a car drawing to a halt made him glance around. Perry White was emerging from a cab.

"Jimmy! Any news?" The editor's face was unusually grey; Jimmy thought Perry looked as if he'd aged about ten years since that morning.

Shaking his head, Jimmy scanned the area in front of the hotel again. Perry came to stand beside him, and in an attempt to demonstrate that he understood how the younger man was feeling, let his hand rest on Jimmy's shoulder.

"Lois will be okay, son. She's a pretty resourceful young woman, you'll see. She'll be okay." As he said the words, Perry wondered who he was trying to reassure: Jimmy or himself.

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Clark tried to slide off the bar-stool he had been leaning against in order to rest his throbbing ankle; the stool slipped and almost overbalanced him, which didn't do much for the maintenance of his dignity. Regaining his footing, he glared at St John.

"Why is Lois Lane here?" he demanded. "You have me hostage - let her go!"

"Oh no, I don't think so, Superman," St John drawled. "You see, both your good self and Miss Lane have to account for your actions."

"What actions?" Lois replied, curling her lip cynically.

"Both of you have to be made to pay for the way you destroyed Lex Luthor," St John replied in a languid voice.

"Excuse me? \*We\* destroyed him?" Lois's voice was incredulous. "Is this the same Lex Luthor who ran the most sophisticated criminal operation in America? The Lex Luthor who schemed to destroy the Daily Planet, and who was probably responsible for hundreds of murders?" She threw St John a scornful glance. Clark threw Lois a wary look, which she either ignored or didn't see: he couldn't be sure. He really did wish that Lois wouldn't make a habit of winding up people who had her at gun-point; it was a bad habit which was bound to get

her into serious trouble one of these days. He wouldn't have minded if he'd been in a position to help, but as it was...

However, St John brushed aside Lois's words with a wave of the hand which held his gun. "I don't believe I asked for your opinion, Miss Lane." In a swift movement, he caught her by the arm and dragged her over to where Superman still stood cuffed to the bar. While his accomplice kept Lois and Superman covered with his gun, St John released the handcuffs which held Clark prisoner and, using a second pair, cuffed both their hands behind their backs, linking their arms together first.

As St John completed his manoeuvre, Lois noticed that Superman was trying to catch her eye. She returned his gaze thoughtfully, attempting to assess what kind of reaction the Kryptonite was having on him. He certainly seemed not to be in possession of his Super-powers, and his manner also appeared quite subdued: apart from his brief outburst when he had noticed her, he had remained silent.

He seemed to be trying to assess her state of mind, she realised; she gave him a brief smile before returning her attention to their captors. "So just what do you intend to do with us?"

"Wait and see, Miss Lane. I do so much prefer surprises, don't you?"

"You'll never get out of here alive, you know that, don't you?" Lois retorted. "The place was already surrounded by cops and by now they probably have half the FBI here as well, now that they know who you are."

"Oh, we'll get out of here all right," St John drawled. "I used to work for MI6, didn't you know? I wouldn't set up a little operation like this without preparing for all eventualities."

"MI6?" Lois was puzzled.

Clark glanced at her; he was equally surprised, but on the other hand, this explained a few things. "The British secret service," he explained tersely.

"A spy turned rotten - I see," Lois drawled cynically. "Lex always did surround himself with a questionable assortment of people."

St John abruptly dropped his languid air and commanded, "Move! That way!" His accomplice, at St John's command, picked up the Kryptonite and followed them.

They were guided back out through the hotel foyer and into the elevator; St John hit the button for the basement. Clark's mind was whirring as they went, testing out possibilities one after another, but his greatest worry was Lois. He might have been able to get himself away - perhaps with some injuries, but he could cope with that - but how could he get both of them out? How could he even do anything to secure their safety with Lois attached to his arm? And an even bigger worry was wondering what Lois herself might be planning.

Lois was concentrating on the elevator's control panel; what if she

could get at the emergency button with her elbow? It would stop the elevator, but would St John simply shoot both of them? In his clearly weakened state - she had noticed him limping a little as they walked - Superman wouldn't be able to move as fast as she would. However, before she could get the opportunity, the door opened.

St John led them down a long passage in the basement, finishing up at a brick wall. Before Lois could ask just where he intended them to go from there, he produced a device from his jacket pocket and pressed a button. A part of the brick facade moved aside and revealed a door, which then swung open at the click of another button. A dark passage lay ahead. Lois bit her lip; however much she tried to hide it, she really did not like the kind of dank, gloomy tunnels in which rats or other verminous creatures might lurk.

Clark felt Lois flinch, and moved his body closer to hers in an attempt to give her comfort. She leaned against him momentarily before moving onwards at an impatient gesture from St John; the silent accomplice brought up the rear, the gun still trained on the two prisoners. The door swung shut again behind them.

They walked for some distance, unable to see much in the gloom. After a while, Lois leaned towards Superman and whispered, "If I pretend to twist my ankle, can you take out Nigel while I get the one behind?"

Clark felt his insides contract: this was exactly the kind of foolhardy thing he had hoped Lois wouldn't try. He squeezed his arm against hers to demonstrate that he was serious, the movement hidden by his cape, and whispered, "\*No\* Lois, don't! I don't have any Super-powers at the moment!"

"I know that - you afraid of getting hurt?" she taunted. Clark gritted his teeth; that was the last fear on his mind. He was afraid that \*she\* would get hurt.

"No, I'm not," he whispered abruptly. "But it's too dangerous - and where can we go down here?"

Lois shrugged, and was about to reply when St John threw them a look over his shoulder and snapped, "Less conversation, if you please."

Clark threw Lois a speaking glance, hoping that she would be able to read his expression in the dark. He wasn't sure whether she had, but at any rate she remained silent for some time, during which interval he estimated that they covered at least a mile. He was finding it very difficult to keep up with the pace Nigel had set, as his ankle had become very painful; he was limping badly, and although he tried hard not to, he was aware that he was leaning heavily on Lois. She had clearly recognised his incapacity, for she seemed to be keeping her body rigid and was leaning towards him so as to provide some support.

Just as Clark was beginning to think he couldn't go much further, St John stopped abruptly. The passage seemed to have come to an end, and a door creaked open. St John gestured at them with his gun, and they blinked at the bright light. Stepping forward, they found themselves in an alley, with a dark-coloured, anonymous-looking van parked in front of them. St John's accomplice pulled open the rear door, and

ordered them to get inside; for Clark, this was easier said than done, and he settled for sitting on the floor in order to swing his legs around. Lois, seeing what he was doing, sat next to him and they managed to co-ordinate their movements to end up sitting back-to-back on the floor of the van. St John climbed in after them and slammed the door shut.

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Outside the hotel, the atmosphere remained tense. Perry White continued to threaten the officer in charge every three minutes, while Jimmy grew more and more despondent. Conversely, the TV reporters talking to camera seemed to become more and more excited as the minutes ticked away without any new developments. The FBI officers sat in their Jeeps, apparently unconcerned about the situation, while Henderson paced up and down, his frown even deeper than usual.

Suddenly, the senior FBI officer stepped forward, and as if this had been a pre-arranged signal, the other anonymous-looking men jumped out of their Jeeps and shouldered automatic rifles and handguns. Gesticulating to the Metropolis Police Department officers who were in front of the hotel to 'get out of the way', the FBI marched on the hotel door. A barrage of shots rang out, and they entered the building.

"What are they doing? They're crazy - Lois'll be killed, for sure!" a white-faced Perry yelled at Henderson.

"God knows," Henderson muttered. "I just hope they don't expect us to take the blame for it." Perry shot him a murderous glance, but then noticed the genuine worry in Henderson's face and he realised that the detective's apparent blase manner was a cover for his real concern for Lois's safety.

"Where's Kent, anyway?" Henderson added after a moment. "He and Lane are partners, right? Why isn't he here?"

Perry shrugged helplessly. He had tried a couple of times to get Clark by phone; he was aware the reporter would want to know what was going on. Perry was well aware of Clark's feelings for Lois, and given that the incident had been covered by every TV and radio station in Metropolis, he was amazed that a frantic Clark hadn't already arrived at the Lexor. "Wherever he is, he can't be anywhere near a radio or TV," Perry replied bleakly.

Henderson looked away; he knew Lane and Kent well, and had guessed the nature of Clark's feelings for his partner long since. "Poor sod. First he has to cope with her almost marrying Luthor, now this."

"Your people damn well better get her out of there alive," Perry growled. "Or else the Planet will sue your butts off."

The two men fell silent, both aware that each was very much afraid Lois would already be dead.

Suddenly, shouts were heard from the region of the hotel foyer. Henderson and Perry ran forward, eager to see what was going on. The FBI officer in charge appeared on the front step holding Lois's jacket

and the bulletproof vest, paused for a moment, then opened his mouth to speak.

"The place is empty. Our birds have flown."

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As the van bumped its way along, Lois glared at St John, who sat on the bench holding the Kryptonite. "Just what are you planning on doing with us?"

"I believe I already told you, Miss Lane. You and your caped friend are going to pay for what happened to Lex Luthor."

Clark swung his head around. "Much though it pains me to say it, I actually tried to save Luthor - whatever he had done, nothing justifies the taking of a life. I tried. But thanks to what he had done to me, I wasn't able to fly."

Lois twisted her neck to stare at him. "What he did to you? What did he do to you, Superman?"

"He had me imprisoned in a Kryptonite cage, Lois - as I'm sure our friend here is well aware. He lured me to his basement the night before your... wedding, and if I hadn't managed to escape the following day he would have killed me."

Lois inhaled sharply; this was yet more evidence of Luthor's villainy. "In that case, I'm glad you weren't able to save him. It looks like he only had himself to blame."

"Poetic justice, you mean, Miss Lane?" Nigel enquired. "Well, how about this for poetic justice, Superman. This - " he gestured at the Kryptonite object " - is fashioned from a substance manufactured from the shavings of Kryptonite I was able to have scraped from the bars of your prison. I am aware that it doesn't appear to possess all of the properties of the true meteorite, but it has worked well enough so far. And indeed, its limitations suit my purpose quite adequately." He paused, as if to add emphasis. "I want you and Miss Lane to die, slowly, together."

I'm sorry, Lois, Clark thought, gritting his teeth as St John's words sank in. He sighed heavily, wishing that his and Lois's positions in the van were reversed; he would have been tempted to attempt to overpower St John with his feet. If St John attempted to shoot, then Clark rather than Lois would have been in the line of fire.

But still, there may be other chances... "So, Mr St John, how precisely do you intend to kill us? Shoot us with that gun of yours?"

"Oh, I'm not going to kill you, Superman. That would be far too quick and easy - and too traceable back to me. No, you will die. It will take some considerable time - days, perhaps. And no-one will find your bodies for a long, long time; by then you will be unrecognisable, rotting corpses devoured by rats and other sewer creatures." St John smiled slightly, then remained silent for the remainder of the journey.

Clark groped behind him for Lois's hands, pushing his cape out of the

way to grip her tightly. He knew Lois hated rats, and the scenario St John had just described sounded appalling. He had felt Lois shudder, though he also noticed that she had been very careful not to react in any other visible manner. Her fingers curled around his, and he noticed that her hands were shaking. Attempting to transmit to her a reassurance he didn't feel himself, he held her hands in his for the remainder of the journey.

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Lois was getting increasingly uncomfortable on the cold floor of the van. Its suspension had seen better days, she thought ruefully: she and Superman were bounced around as the driver took corners with no concern at all for the comfort of his passengers. She stifled a grunt of pain as yet another bump in the road caused her to hit her upper arm against Superman's elbow; he murmured an apology and tried to shift position so that he wasn't bumping into her every few seconds.

She had tried not to show any reaction to Nigel's description of the fate he intended for them, but it had been hard. The description had chilled her to the bone, and she suspected that he was well aware of it. Lex had known of her phobia of rats, and she was sure that Nigel had learnt of it from his former employer. She was grateful for the warm pressure of Superman's hands gripping hers; he might not be able to offer her any practical way out of the situation, but at least he could give her moral support.

She silently cursed her inability to get away from St John before he had forced them into the van. She could have done it, if Superman had been more co-operative; why he hadn't gone along with her plan while they had been in the tunnel she couldn't figure out. It could have worked as well; all right, he had no Super-powers at present, and his foot was clearly hurting him, but he was still a tall, well-built specimen of manhood and between them they could easily have got the better of St John and his skinny accomplice. Surely Superman wasn't a coward? Was he completely useless without his powers?

And yet he had done his best, through speaking glances and gestures, to give her moral support. Okay... that was all very well, but it didn't help them to get away. Given their current predicament, Lois knew, they would be very lucky to escape with their lives. She closed her eyes, reflecting on the situation; although she had often been in dangerous situations in her job, she had never really expected to die before she even made it to thirty. Unconnected thoughts flew through her mind. I never made a will... what will happen to my fish? I won't get to say goodbye to Lucy... I'll never be able to show Dad I can get to the top in journalism... Clark. I want Clark... why did I never tell him how much he means to me?

It was cruelly ironic, Lois thought wryly. Here she was, on her way to probable death, with Superman for company, and here she was yearning for Clark. Only a couple of months earlier she would have given anything to spend even ten uninterrupted minutes with Superman, and now it looked as if she might be getting to spend at least a couple of days alone with him. Sure, they would probably be dying a slow, painful death, but she would be alone with him...

... and she now realised that he wasn't the person she wanted to be with!

It's just because I'm still angry with him over what he said that night! she told herself. I've been in love with Superman for ever... but he hurt me, and that will take some getting over.

The van stopped abruptly, interrupting Lois's train of thought, and Nigel St John got to his feet. "If you would care to follow me I will escort you to your accommodations."

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"What do you mean, gone?!" Henderson demanded. "The damn hotel is surrounded - no-one could have got out without being seen and caught."

The FBI officer shrugged. "We swept the place from top to bottom, even used heat-seeking devices. There's no-one in here but us. There must be another way out your people didn't know about."

"Wouldn't surprise me, knowing Lex Luthor," Perry muttered. "He always did like to cover all his exits."

"Well, it's too damned late now," Henderson retorted. "If they've gone, they could be anywhere by now." He swung around and addressed a nearby police officer. "Get an APB out on St John, and circulate descriptions of him and his accomplice - you must have got a decent description from the hostages by now." Turning back to the FBI, he snapped, "How about getting your people to find this other exit? Then we might have some clue as to where they could be!"

Perry turned and walked away, back to where Jimmy stood some way apart from the police cordon. He was hugely relieved that the FBI hadn't returned to report finding Lois's bloody corpse, but his heart was heavy at the thought that St John had spirited her away somewhere.

Jimmy stood as if frozen, having even forgotten to take photographs of the FBI storming the hotel. Perry, realising his young assistant needed distraction, spoke roughly. "Olsen, what are you doing? Get on back to the Planet now - I need you to put together a list of all the property Luthor owns in Metropolis."

Jimmy looked up, and for a split second there was a trace of his usual spirit. "Oh yeah? You looking for a long list, Chief?"

"Goddammit, Olsen, \*think\*! St John's not going to take her somewhere that's rented out to legitimate business - like the bank, or anywhere like that. But old apartment buildings, warehouses, the power plant - anywhere people could hide out. It's gotta be worth a try!"

Jimmy shrugged. "If you think it'll help, Chief." He ran his hand through the lock of hair flopping over his forehead. "But what about CK?"

"What about him? If he shows up, he can help you. But I sure can't figure out where that boy is." Perry shook his head in bemusement. He would have laid money on Clark Kent showing up long before now - and trying to get into the Lexor himself to rescue Lois. Where was Kent?

And where was Lois? - and was she even still alive? Perry White didn't want to be the one to break the news to Clark Kent if she wasn't.

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"Get a move on!" St John's accomplice, who had opened the rear doors of the van, gestured impatiently at Lois and Superman with his gun.

"Yeah? Well, you try getting out of this thing when you're sprawled on the floor, bruised all over, hands tied behind your back and as if all that isn't enough, you're tied to someone else!" Lois snapped. Clark squeezed her hand in a warning gesture, which she ignored; after all, St John intended to kill them anyway, so what did it matter if she made him angry?

They scrambled out of the van with difficulty, Clark wincing as his painful ankle had to take his weight once more. He looked around them; there was no clue in their immediate surroundings as to where in Metropolis they might be. The van was parked in another anonymous-looking alley in a run-down part of the city; it could as easily be Suicide Slum as Hobbs Bay or even the South Side. He sniffed, but couldn't detect anything beyond the rancid smell of bad drains and rotting refuse. He sighed inwardly; he had never realised just how much he had taken his Super-powers for granted. Had he been his usual self, he would have been able to tell by sniffing whether they were close to the river - which would have indicated the Bay area; or the chemical plant, which would have indicated the South Side. As for the Slum... well, Superman was usually able to smell that several miles away!

But as Clark Kent, a human being with no unusual or superhuman powers at all, he was unable to detect any of these things; and as well as that, he was suffering pain. Pain was something Clark had hardly ever experienced in his twenty-eight years; he remembered with a wry grimace his shock at receiving a paper cut after his first encounter with Kryptonite. And as for the pain induced by Kryptonite itself... well, after that, the throbbing in his ankle was little more than an irritation. Or it should be, he instructed himself. Grit your teeth and ignore it! he instructed himself.

He returned his attention to his immediate surroundings and noticed that Nigel had removed the large padlock and chain which had secured a rusted door in front of them. The other man gave Lois a push forward to indicate that they should enter.

The stench hit Lois as she approached the door, and she grimaced, holding her breath. It was \*foul\*! Stale, putrid air and the stink of the rotting corpses of some unmentionable creatures. She began to cough and choke, turning her head so that it was buried in Superman's shoulder. She \*couldn't\* go in there!

"No, Nigel!" she gasped as she was given another shove to encourage her to move. "Kill me now, here, if you want, but I won't go in there!"

The former spy assumed a languid posture against the doorframe. "Certainly, Miss Lane, if you insist. Though I think I might shoot

Superman instead - Lex would have so much enjoyed having his adversary vulnerable and at his mercy, don't you think?" He removed the safety catch from his gun, raised it and held it trained upon Superman's head, his finger on the trigger.

"No - I'll go in," Lois gritted out. She couldn't allow St John to shoot Superman right in front of her.

They moved forward, Lois attempting to hold her breath. Nigel swung the door shut behind them and produced a pencil-torch which provided a pinprick of light; not sufficient to prevent Lois and Superman from almost tripping up on unseen obstacles. After several paces, St John stopped, and bent to lift what Clark realised was a manhole cover.

That's it - that's where we are! Clark realised. He still wasn't sure of their geographic location, but they were above part of the city's sewers, and, if his guess was correct, it was an old section which was no longer in use and had been drained and sealed off.

The cover lifted, St John gestured to the hole in the ground. "Down you go!" he drawled smoothly.

Lois peered over towards the hole; St John obligingly shone his torch downwards. She saw a rickety ladder extending downwards, and observed sardonically, "I don't know how you expect us to climb down that with our arms linked together!"

"True," St John agreed. Slipping his gun into his jacket pocket, he produced a key from another pocket, and moved behind his captives, removing the handcuff from one of Lois's wrists and pulling her arm away from Clark's before securing the cuff again. Freed from the constraint of having Lois secured to his side, Clark quickly positioned his body protectively in front of Lois's, grimacing as his injured ankle protested at the sudden movement. As St John turned back to face them, Clark kicked out, attempting to knock him off balance. His foot caught Nigel's hip, and the former spy staggered a few steps backwards. Clark spun around, hoping to use the same tactic to knock the gun out of the hand of Nigel's accomplice, who seemed unsure what to do in the face of such insubordination on the part of his captives.

However, Clark's injured ankle refused to support him a second time, and he lost his balance, tumbling to the ground with a groan. Lois, who had begun to move towards Nigel with the intention of finishing off what Superman had started, instead hurried over to Superman in concern. As Superman managed - with difficulty - to raise himself on his elbows, Lois was pushed aside by Nigel, who used the butt of his pistol to strike Superman across the face. Lois winced with the sound of the blow, and opened her eyes again to see Superman slowly turn his head back to face Nigel. He spoke, in a rough, harsh tone which surprised Lois.

"Kill me - or leave me to die - if you must, St John. But let Lois Lane go! She's done you no harm, and she did Lex Luthor no harm either." He paused, breathing heavily, then added, "Luthor loved her enough to want to marry her - do you think he would have wanted this?"

Nigel laughed aloud, an incongruous sound in their surroundings.

"Love! You really believe Lex Luthor \*loved\* that woman?" He snorted, a sound somewhere between amusement and disgust.

Lois turned to face Superman. "Luthor wasn't in love with me, Superman. He just saw me as a challenge, and wanted to possess me. And Nigel was jealous of Lex's interest in me, so it's no use appealing to his good nature on that score." She tossed her head. "Not that he has one, of course."

"Enough of this chit-chat - fascinating though it is, it is getting late," Nigel drawled, then gestured towards the open manhole again. "If you wouldn't mind..."

Clark got to his feet and took the few steps necessary to bring him to the edge of the hole. "Lois - I'll go first, and that way if you slip I can break your fall."

"Ever the gentleman, Superman?" Nigel enquired smoothly. "Be my guest."

With difficulty, Clark climbed down the unsteady ladder; between its shakiness and loose rungs, his aching ankle and the lack of hands with which to steady himself, he was surprised that he didn't fall before reaching the bottom. Once he was standing on the floor beneath, he watched Lois's equally careful descent. He heard Nigel shout at his accomplice to fetch something from the van, but was unable to hear what was being sought, precisely - damn that Kryptonite and not having powers, he thought bitterly.

Lois took the final couple of rungs and stepped onto the ground beneath, and as she did so St John shouted from above them. "A little present to keep you company, my friends!" There was a thump, and a green glow caught Clark's eye. The Kryptonite thing - Nigel was really making sure of his victims' fate. It was all too clear now what Luthor's former assistant was planning: he was going to shut them in this closed-off section of sewer and leave them to die of thirst and hunger, or asphyxiation.

If they didn't expire from the foul smell first, Clark thought with grim humour.

The final confirmation of St John's plan came as they heard the sound of the ladder being pulled up. Lois looked at Superman and saw her own fear and despair reflected in what she was able to see of his expression. We're going to be left here, in the pitch dark, hands cuffed behind our backs... and there's rats!

She yelled out to Nigel. "At least don't leave us tied up!"

Nigel's laugh could be heard echoing around the chamber. "Catch!" he called, and a faint tinkle could be heard a moment or two later. He's thrown the keys down, Clark thought; he must be really sure we can't possibly escape from here.

A moment later, a grating, scraping sound above indicated that the manhole cover was being replaced. "Enjoy your stay," St John called; then all that could be heard was the sound of footsteps retreating.

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Clark blinked several times in an attempt to accustom his eyes to the darkness. There were strange sounds in this underground chamber as well; some dripping water, which was probably flowing down the walls rather than in a channel, and would definitely not be drinkable; squeaking noises which were almost certainly rats, mice and other underground creatures; and other, unrecognisable, sounds.

The smell didn't get any better on closer acquaintance either, he mused.

"Superman? Where are you?" Lois's voice sounded scared.

He moved towards the sound. "I'm right here, Lois. Right here." He did his best to stand close to her in an attempt to offer comfort.

After a few moments, during which he could hear the sound of sniffing, she said in a small voice, "What do you think are the chances of our getting out of here?"

Clark paused for a moment, then spoke in as cheerful a tone as he could manage. "Well, let's assess the situation. I'm powerless, and my ankle hurts like hell. We're trapped underground, and from what I can tell by the echoes around here, this part of the sewers is blocked off to create a small chamber. The ladder is missing and the manhole is covered, and anyway it's too high to reach even if you stood on my shoulders and stretched your arms up. There's no ventilation, and we have no food or water. Apart from that... no problem." He finished on a light note, hoping that his wry summation of the situation might at least make Lois smile.

Lois was silent for a few minutes, simply leaning against Superman. Then she moved away, dropping to her knees. "At least let's try to find those damned keys. He dropped them around here somewhere!"

Clark knelt as well, though he felt that it was a hopeless quest. "Lois, they could be anywhere - we heard them fall, but they could have bounced. And I can't see a thing!"

"Me neither," Lois agreed. Except for... that glowing green thing! She crawled over to the manufactured Kryptonite object, crouched down in front of it and managed to hold it in her hand. Moving back to Clark, she crouched with her back to him and held the Kryptonite object close to the floor. "Can you see anything now?"

Clark was surprised at how much light Kryptonite provided in the darkness; he supposed he had never before got close enough to the substance to notice. Although, he realised, when I was in that Kryptonite cage it glowed in the dark...

"Aha!" he exclaimed in triumph as he spotted a glint of silver. He turned, fumbled around on the ground and eventually felt the metal of the keys. He seized the small keyring and gripped the keys firmly. "Now we have to figure out how to get these cuffs off."

Lois dropped the Kryptonite and struggled to her feet; she found Superman in the darkness and moved to stand back-to-back with him. He fumbled around for several minutes as he attempted to connect the key

with the key-hole; further delay ensued as he had to work out which was the correct key. His grip slipped occasionally, and the point of the key stabbed Lois's wrist several times. She gritted her teeth and willed him to succeed.

Suddenly, the cuffs opened as Superman managed to insert the key and turn it. Lois shook the handcuffs off, and rubbed her wrists vigorously for a few moments. Then she remembered Superman, and groped her way behind him to take the keys from his tired and strained hand. Quickly, she found the keyhole on his handcuffs and unlocked them. He also rubbed his sore wrists and then stretched his big body.

"I never thought I'd have reason to be thankful for Kryptonite!" he mused aloud wryly. Lois moved to stand in front of him, barely able to make out his face in the dark. "That stuff is really dangerous to you?"

"Oh yeah," Clark replied heavily. "Normally, it causes me excruciating pain and prolonged exposure to it can kill me. This stuff - whatever process was used to reconstruct the Kryptonite St John scraped off the cage must have diluted its worst effects. All it's done this time is take away my Super-powers - which unfortunately means I can't get us out of here." He gave a long sigh. "I'm sorry, Lois - I wish I could have found a way to get us out of this before now."

"I don't think there was much we could have done," Lois said thoughtfully. "I know I had that idea when we were in the tunnel, but you were right - where could we have gone? They'd have shot us dead before we'd gone half a dozen paces - and anyway, we didn't have the device to open the doors."

Clark hugged Lois lightly to him; whether it was for her comfort or his he couldn't have said. "All the same, I'm sorry."

"How long do you think we have?" Lois asked.

Clark shook his head, then realised she probably hadn't been able to see the gesture. He released her and began to pace the area of the blocked-off sewer. Thinking for a few moments, he then made his way back to where Lois was standing, guided by the glow from the Kryptonite. "Hard to say - I don't know whether we're likely to die first from thirst or lack of oxygen - or even cold. A couple of days, anyway."

"So we have time to figure out a way out of here," Lois responded firmly.

"How?" Clark asked blankly. He realised that he was actually feeling helpless in a dangerous situation, for the first time in his life. He had felt powerless in relation to emotional situations, relationships; but never in relation to things which simply required the ability to \*do\* things, or to think his way out of a practical problem. Yet with the absence of his Super-powers he also seemed to have lost the ability to think intelligently.

That's nonsense! he told himself. Kryptonite has never had that effect on me!

He forced himself to think rationally about their predicament. They were in a section of sewer, beneath the ground. The section they were in was about eight feet wide, and possibly twenty-five feet long. The blocked-off ends were bricked up, so no chance of escape that way; not much air would get through either. As he had descended the ladder, he had estimated the drop at about fifteen feet. There was water in the sewer, but nothing suitable for drinking; but was it coming from anywhere? Did it go to anywhere? He wasn't sure.

Lost in thought, he failed to notice Lois picking up the Kryptonite, but he heard the click of her footsteps as she walked across the rough, damp floor. "Where are you going?"

"Exploring," she replied. "No, stay there - you need to keep your weight off that ankle."

Clark shrugged, not seeing much point to what Lois was doing. And his ankle was throbbing quite badly now. He hesitated, then sat on the floor; it was cold, damp, it smelt and he wouldn't like to guess at the nature of the substances coating the surface; but his ankle felt better for it.

Lois, meanwhile, had found the wall on one side of the sewer and was walking along, examining it for any signs of a way out. Nothing; until she was half-way along the end wall, and her hand, reaching up as high as it could go, felt the brick give way to something. She couldn't tell what, since her fingers were only able to reach up to the point where the brick stopped, and she was unable to stretch any higher

"Superman! Come and see this!"

"What?" Clark didn't particularly want to get up, but he struggled to his feet and managed to follow the green glow to reach Lois, only tripping up twice on the uneven floor on his way. "What have you found?"

"This - give me your hand," Lois replied impatiently. She took his hand and drew it up until he was touching what she had found.

"That's glass," Superman replied slowly. "It's a window!" He sounded excited - this could be their way out.

"It's filthy," Lois said in disgust. "That's why there's no light."

Clark crouched down beside Lois. "Climb onto my shoulders and I'll lift you up. Use my cape to clean it, and see whether you can see what's outside."

The window was indeed filthy, with ground-in dirt and grime; Lois damped Superman's cape with some of the slimy water which ran down the wall and managed to clear a small hole in the centre of the pane. However, the outside of the window was equally grimy, so it was very difficult to see anything. "I think it's a back street - the window's just at pavement level," she said at last. She continued cleaning until she had covered most of the inside of the pane.

"Okay - now we just need to smash it," Superman replied. "Get down."

"Why - what are you going to do?" Lois demanded.

"Break it, of course!"

"With what? Your bare hands? You don't have any powers! You'll cut yourself!"

"I know," Clark replied patiently. "But I'm sure I can find something to use - a brick, or something like that. My boot, if necessary."

Lois darted away again; the small amount of additional light provided by the window helped her to see her way. She returned in a moment with something in her hand, which she passed to Superman. "This might do."

Clark took it; it was a broken piece of brick. He smashed it against the window several times, but to no avail. It was constructed of reinforced glass and would not break.

After half an hour of repeated smashing, they conceded defeat. That glass just was not going to break.

It was also clear that, wherever they were, it was not a much-visited area of town. Not a single person had passed by that window during the time they had been banging and smashing at it. Lois and Superman slid down to a sitting position, leaning against the wall.

After a few moments of sitting in silence, Lois became aware of a pressing need.

"Superman - I need to go."

Clark's head turned sharply towards Lois. Was she joking? "Lois, I'd love to get out of here too, but as things are I can't see it happening just yet."

"No - I mean I *\*really\** need to go. You know - *\*go\**."

"Oh!" As it dawned upon him exactly what Lois meant, Clark fell silent. He was sure that the provision of sanitary facilities had not exactly been a priority as far as Nigel St John was concerned. From Clark's point of view, taking care of such a basic human need was not likely to cause any deterioration at all in their environment; he wasn't sure, however, whether anything he could say to that effect would lessen Lois's embarrassment. So he allowed his head to fall towards his chest and remained discreetly silent.

Lois got to her feet and began to explore again. At the far side of the enclosed area, her foot encountered empty space. She stumbled, and in the process discovered that there was a hole in the ground about a foot in diameter. Cautiously, she put her hand in; the hole extended some inches down. Withdrawing her hand again, she felt in her trousers pocket, and was rewarded by discovering the stub-end of a pencil. She dropped it in the hole; a couple of seconds later she heard a faint splash. Water.

Quickly, she relieved herself as silently as she could, then

readjusted her clothing and headed back to Superman. Clark raised his head as she approached, but made no comment. After a few moments, he suggested, "Think you could get that Kryptonite stuff as far away from me as possible? I know it's not doing me any harm beyond the lack of powers, but... I just don't like it anywhere around me."

"Sure." Lois picked up the coated-plastic object and traced her way back to the other side of the sewer. Struck by a thought, she put the object on the ground and stamped on it. It shattered. Quickly, she picked up the pieces and walked carefully around until she found her hole again, and then dropped the pieces down one by one.

She returned to Superman and explained what she had done. "I don't know for sure, but I think it might lead down to an underground stream, which means there's a chance the Kryptonite could be out of harm's way." She paused, and Clark reached for her hand in a gesture of thanks. "Do you think there's a chance your powers will come back now?"

Clark shrugged. "I'm not sure. It's always taken me time to recover from Kryptonite exposure before - the first time, it was a few days. But the sun gives me a lot of my powers, and there's not exactly a lot of sunlight down here."

"True," Lois agreed. "But there's a little bit of light from that window now - maybe if you stay sitting here, it might help?"

"Maybe." Clark agreed, though he didn't hold out much hope.

Lois turned to study Superman; in the faint light from the window she noticed the puffiness of his face where Nigel had struck him with the gun, and the streaks of blood under his nose and on his forehead. She wished she had some clean water to wash the blood away, but decided that in the circumstances it was better to leave the injuries as they were. She offered to look at his injured ankle but he refused, saying that it would hurt more to take his boot off than to leave it as it was.

They fell silent, each lost in their own thoughts.

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Back at the Planet's temporary offices, Perry White was on the telephone, giving some hapless employee at the Mayor's office a hard time. "I want to know how MPD's finest, along with a posse of FBI, could just let three people escape right under their noses! What in the hell do we pay taxes for anyway?" He listened briefly, fingers tapping impatiently on his desk.

"Aw, forget it! Just tell the mayor that she won't like what she reads in tomorrow's Planet!" he finished abruptly, slamming the receiver down in its cradle.

"Uh... Chief?" Jimmy Olsen tentatively stuck his head around the door.

"What you got, Jimmy?" Perry looked eager, briefly, hoping that his young assistant might have got hold of some leads.

"Well... not much, really. I put together that list of Luthor's properties like you said, and went through it with Eduardo, but we couldn't see anywhere which looked likely. But then I started thinking, wondering how St John had managed to get out of the Lexor without being caught, so I called up a plan of the Lexor on the computer. Here - let me show you." Jimmy laid a print-out on Perry's desk and gestured to it. "See - there. The basement extends out pretty far, looks like beyond the hotel's frontage - I wondered whether there was any reason for it?"

Perry stared at the plans. "You just might be onto something, Jimmy." He reached for the telephone, punched in a number, then spoke. "Get me Henderson." He waited, studying the plans again. "Yeah. Perry White here. Have your men checked the Lexor's basement thoroughly? We think there might be some sort of way out down there. Well, it's a bit of a guess, but if you wanna come over and see what Olsen's just shown me... Okay, see you later."

The editor of the Planet leaned back in his chair and rubbed his tired eyes, before turning back to Jimmy. "Any luck finding Kent?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I can't figure out where he's got to. I went over to his apartment on the way back here, but he wasn't there and his neighbour said she hadn't seen him all morning. He's not written down for any assignment, and no-one here's seen him."

"Last I heard from him was shortly before I sent Lois down to the Lexor - he emailed me some copy, but as far as I knew he was at his place then," Perry replied thoughtfully. "I just know he'd want to know about this."

"You and me both, Chief," Jimmy agreed with feeling. "CK'd be really cut up if anything happened to Lois."

"Well, we just gotta hope the cops we pay our taxes to fund get their asses in gear and find her," Perry growled. Alive, he added silently.

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They sat side by side, not touching, in their cold, evil-smelling prison, leaning against the damp wall. A long time had elapsed - Lois had no idea just how long - since either of them had spoken; each seemed to be lost in their own thoughts.

Lois was battling within herself; a part of her wanted to break the silence and challenge Superman about the conversation in her apartment that night before she had accepted Luthor's proposal of marriage - apart from anything else, she realised, if she - they - were going to die, it would be her last chance, and anyway if she had to die she would rather it was in the company of someone she liked, rather than someone against whom she still had feelings of suppressed anger. However, another part of her, bolstered perhaps too much by pride and hurt, did not want to be the one to drag up the memory of that painful incident. It clearly hadn't meant much to Superman; after all, they had been in this sewer together for... oh, over an hour, and it hadn't occurred to him to apologise. Or did he consider it too embarrassing to remember Lois Lane's delusion, not only that

she was in love with him, but that he might just possibly return her love?

She glared into the darkness, the angry part of her having won out for the time being. She would say nothing.

Clark, on the other hand, was reflecting on what he saw as the desperate sadness and tragedy of their - or perhaps more accurately, his - predicament. It wasn't just that they faced almost certain death unless he could figure a way out of this. He? Lois would just about kill me herself if she knew I'd automatically assumed I was the only one of the two of us who could get us out of here, he reminded himself. Lois keeps complaining that I try to control her too much, that I patronise her by thinking I have the right to protect her - and she's right!

It's just that I know that I'm invulnerable and she's not, he pointed out to his conscience as he justified his actions to himself.

But you're not very invulnerable right now! that same conscience pointed out.

No... and there lies the other problem, Clark admitted. Right now, I'm no more or no less than Clark Kent, Lois's partner and - as far as she's aware - more or less normal, average human being. No Super-powers. Yet I'm dressed as Superman, and unless I'm going to tell her the truth right now, I have to let her believe that she's with Superman.

Tell her the truth... Clark mused upon that for a moment, and then decided that he couldn't make that decision yet.

But you're probably going to die, his conscience irritatingly pointed out. Doesn't she deserve to know? And where's the problem, anyway - who's she going to tell?

Maybe... I guess so, Clark conceded. But I can't face telling her yet...

And so, he reasoned, therein lies the real difficulty. She thinks that the last time she saw me was that night at her apartment - and she's probably pretty mad at me for that. I know that the last time she saw me we made up, as friends. Was that really only yesterday, he wondered in amazement.

Why did it all have to happen like this? he asked himself.

Because you wanted it every way, his conscience retorted instantly, aggravatingly. Why did his conscience always have to be right?

For that was exactly how it had been. Clark Kent, farmer's son from Kansas, had fallen in love with city girl Lois Lane the instant he had seen her, and subsequent encounters had not changed a thing. But she had made it very clear that she regarded his interest as an irritation, that he was possibly the last person she would consider seriously for a romantic attachment. There had been her last-minute invitation to the White Orchid Ball, where she had ridiculed his suggestion - admittedly made as a taunt - that it would be a date. And there had been those highly charged few moments as they ate Chinese food during a late-night session at the Planet. Their eyes

had locked, and the air had shimmered with suppressed tension... then she had broken the mood with those few words.

Well, so Clark had recognised his place, and he had instead concentrated on winning Lois's trust and affection as a friend. And he had succeeded; there had been many moments, days, evenings over the past year which were tribute to his success. The relieved, emotional hug after his first encounter with Kryptonite - about which Lois had known nothing - and his final one with Trask; that hug was so different to an earlier occasion when Lois had hugged Clark warmly on discovering that he was alive, only because it also meant that Superman was also alive. The time Lois had actually invited his company when she was afraid for her life. The time he had actually resigned from the Planet and had been ready to leave Metropolis... despite Lois's flippant remark upon his return, it had been obvious that she had missed him. The fact that when she felt alone, or unhappy, or excited, it was he, Clark, she called on the phone, or came to see. He was the one who held her and comforted her when she was sad or afraid.

But he hadn't been able to resist looking for more, and since he couldn't get it as Clark he had taken it as Superman. It had seemed so harmless, and it had provided such a boost to his ego, once he had realised that Lois was smitten by his creation. To visit her at her apartment, to send her notes, to take her flying, to make the occasional flattering remark or favour her with a special smile, and receive in return her absolute trust, loyalty and affection, had been an immense source of joy to him. But what had he been trying to do? To win her for Superman? Of course he hadn't, he answered instantly. But then why? Why the obvious demonstrations of affection - the closeness, the demonstrative caring for her well-being, the lingering looks, and the kisses?

Did you really think she would be unaffected by it? he asked himself. Where did you think it was leading?

So, because she didn't want you as Clark, did you think that you would show her what she was missing?

Clark ran his hands roughly through his hair. Of course that hadn't been it, he argued. But then *\*what\** did you think you were doing, his conscience demanded.

That's just the problem, he answered honestly. I *\*didn't\** think. I just... wanted. Wanted to be near her, to see her look *\*at\** me and not through me, to get her to smile at me in that wonderful way she has, as if all the lights in Metropolis had come on at once. To get her to notice me... to... love... me.

But she doesn't love you! the conscience pointed out. She loves Superman - who isn't real. Who doesn't exist, who is only a part-time cartoon persona in order to provide a disguise for Clark Kent, who really does exist, but unfortunately Lois Lane doesn't seem to recognise that fact; she's only interested in primary-colour-clad Super-heroes and multi-millionaires...

That's not fair! he told himself before his conscience was able to get in on the act. Lex was a mistake, and Lois has admitted it. And anyway, he mused, I was probably to blame - at least in part - for the Lex thing going as far as it did. If I hadn't acted like such a

spoilt, jealous kid, and been there for Lois when she needed me - and really tried to come up with some evidence which could've convinced her - she might never have accepted his proposal.

But all of this, Clark realised, didn't help in the current situation. Here he was, as Superman rather than Clark, imprisoned in a dark, abandoned sewer with Lois, whose last memory of Superman was an encounter she would probably prefer to forget. He sighed heavily.

He felt, rather than saw, Lois turn her head towards him. She didn't speak.

Okay, it's up to me, he accepted. He sighed again.

"Lois, I owe you an apology." His voice was deep, deliberately taking on the serious tones of his Superman persona.

"Yes?" Lois was conceding nothing.

"Yes, I do. The last time we spoke... I said one thing in particular which was unforgivable, and gave you completely the wrong impression of me." He paused, waiting to see whether she would help him out. She didn't, remaining silent and still beside him.

"What I said about... your robe needing to be lead-lined... I would never use my powers to take advantage of you or anyone else like that, Lois. I don't know whether I can expect you to believe that, but I assure you that I only said it because... I was angry, and disappointed." He stopped abruptly, fearful that he would reveal too much.

Lois Lane, investigative journalist, would not have been much good at her job if she had missed a clue like that. "Disappointed... why?" Her tone was not especially inviting, but neither was it cold.

Clark sighed again. "I had - some idea - of why you wanted to see me, and I was disappointed that the question of whether you accepted the...proposal you'd received should hang on me. And..." oh hell, I'm really digging deeper holes for myself, he thought grimly "...I knew what you'd said to Clark when he told you how he felt."

Lois was surprised; for some reason she had not expected this. She had worked out some time before that, somehow, Clark and Superman had become close friends. It had galled her to realise that Clark got his share of Superman exclusives - frequently more than she did - and when she'd discovered that Clark seemed to have some mysterious means of contacting Superman she had been extremely jealous. But she hadn't quite realised that they were on terms of intimate friendship.

Another mistake, thought Clark as he watched Lois's reaction to his words; why is it that when I have a pen or a keyboard in front of me I never have any problem composing what I want to say, and yet I'm a complete mess when it comes to verbalising my feelings?

Trying to explain away the hole he had dug for himself, he added, "When he said you wanted to see me, he was pretty upset, so..." He allowed the sentence to trail off, deliberately allowing Lois to draw

her own conclusions. "So anyway, I want you to know that I am very sorry for what I said, and I wish that I had never said it."

Lois closed her eyes briefly; he had apologised for that crack about her robe, but what about the rest of it?

"That wasn't all you said," she pointed out at last, in a tone which she considered to be a model of restraint.

Clark shot her a glance; he was just about able to make out her expression in the dim light. Her face seemed strained, though he was unsure whether that was a consequence of their imprisonment, the prospect of dying incarcerated in this appalling underground chamber, or possibly even the appalling smell - which *\*definitely\** did not get any better on a lengthy acquaintance. He conceded that perhaps she had a right to an explanation.

"Okay, yes, it wasn't," he agreed. "But I meant what I said about there being things you don't know about me. And, no matter how close we were as friends, I *\*couldn't\** tell you - it would endanger you, and I couldn't do that to you."

Lois shifted slightly - the floor was uncomfortable as well as damp - and faced Superman. "I don't think I could be in a much more dangerous position than this. You've said you don't see much chance of us getting out of here alive. So what's wrong with telling me now?"

Yep... trust Lois to spot the flaw in my reasoning, Clark thought wryly. "Maybe. Not just yet... but I promise you that if we're still in here tomorrow I'll tell you everything." There. That solves it, he thought.

Yes - by postponing the problem, as usual, his conscience taunted. Do you seriously think her reaction is likely to be any different tomorrow? You *\*know\** she's going to take it badly.

But it was said, and Lois was nodding. "Okay. I'll hold you to that." She paused, then thought, well, I won't get another chance if we *\*are\** going to die in here...

"Superman, did you mean it when you said you didn't believe I loved you?"

Clark closed his eyes briefly. How could he answer that one without telling her the truth? But didn't he owe her the truth, despite his crass and cowardly behaviour in putting off the problem until tomorrow?

"Lois, I... you really don't know me well enough to understand your feelings for me. You've been dazzled by the things I can do, like flying, saving your life... you don't know *\*me\**. And that's why I didn't - "

Lois interrupted him, saying savagely, "Oh yes? And just who gives you the right to pontificate like that about what I do and don't know? I can't remember when I've last been so *\*patronised\** by anyone! I've been dazzled by you - you know that for a fact, do you? Was I being dazzled when I found out that it wasn't you who was causing the temperature rises in Metropolis? Sure, I think it's great that you

can fly - but if you couldn't see that I fell in love with the man underneath the costume and the powers, then you're not the decent, true and caring man I thought you were."

But you didn't fall in love with the man beneath the costume, Lois, Clark thought with a silent groan. You told him you didn't love him. You told him he was a friend to you, no more. You made him feel as if he was crazy even to imagine that you might love him the way he loves you... You hurt him so badly when you made it clear that you would choose Lex Luthor, the biggest villain in Metropolis, rather than him...

Lois bit her lip, wondering what Superman's silence meant. Was he still doubting her? She forced down her aggression, and chose her words carefully, trying to make him see that she really meant what she said.

"Superman... you said you didn't believe me when I said I'd love you even if you were an ordinary man. Well, you're just an ordinary man now, aren't you? You have no powers, you're vulnerable, and hurt... and I still love you. \*Now\* do you believe me?"

Clark caught his breath. She was right, in a way... and yet she couldn't have been more wrong. He was still, to her, Superman; he certainly wasn't Clark. And how would she react if she discovered... \*when\* she discovered... that he was indeed Clark? Could she love that ordinary man, with or without a few extra-ordinary powers?

But is it really her fault if she didn't see Clark underneath the Super-hero in the suit, the persistent voice of his conscience asked. It was you who invented Superman - and encouraged her to think that you were two separate people. How can you blame her for believing what you wanted her to believe? Clark stilled, recognising that Lois's feelings for Superman, and lack of feelings for Clark, were entirely the consequence of his own actions. Sure, it would have been better if she'd fallen for Clark rather than Superman... but how could she resist someone who flattered her, who made her feel special, who had \*literally\* swept her off her feet?

It dawned on Clark suddenly just why the little voice of his conscience had the maddening habit of being right: it simply reflected his mother's wisdom and advice. Martha Kent also had an extremely annoying - and loveable - habit of always being able to tell him precisely what he'd done wrong in a given situation, even if she wasn't always able to suggest exactly what he should do to make things right again. I wonder what she'd think I should do here, Clark wondered.

In what way? his inner self asked. To resolve things with Lois, or to get the two of you out alive?

Clark closed his eyes briefly. Oh yeah, let's focus on something achievable, he thought wryly. Find a way out of this darned sewer!

As Superman's silence stretched into several minutes, Lois looked away; clearly he still didn't believe her. She drew her knees up towards her chest and wrapped her arms about them, leaning her chin on her kneecaps. Does it matter? she asked herself. It's clear that Superman would never be interested in a relationship with an ordinary

woman anyway. But... she bit her lip and faced the reality of their situation. It seemed likely that she and Superman would die, together, in this awful place. If so, then she didn't want her life - their lives - to end without getting him to understand. She loved him, and it was so hard to sit there, beside him, facing death, and not to know whether he could possibly care for her in return - or even find her attractive enough to want to seek some comfort and distraction from her during the hours they had left to them.

Eventually, she raised her head and faced him again. "Superman, I'm not sure what more I can say to convince you. All I know is that ever since I first met you, on board the Messenger, I haven't been able to get you out of my mind. Any time we've been in danger, I've thought of your safety before my own. I feel so good whenever I'm around you... and when you smile at me, or touch me, I feel as if I have all I ever want in this world."

Tell me about it, Clark thought. That's how I've felt since the day I met you, Lois... a week before I swallowed the bomb on the Messenger.

He turned to face her, and in the dim light from the window saw the earnest, pleading expression on her face and the love in her eyes. Oh, Lois, why couldn't you ever have looked at Clark like that?

She moved a hand, tentatively, towards him; he responded and took her small hand in his large one. He leaned closer to her and gently, slowly, brushed his lips across hers. Her lips parted invitingly, but he drew back, instead stretching his free hand towards her face and curving his palm caressingly along her cheek.

After a moment, he shifted so that their bodies were touching, and he curved his arm about her shoulders to draw her closer to him. She rested her head on his shoulder, apparently content for the time being.

Lois may have seemed content, but inwardly her emotions were confused. He had given her a look of such longing, she reflected; there had been something in his expression, a sadness in his eyes, which she simply couldn't interpret. There had also been something oddly familiar about that sad look... something was nagging inside her brain which told her she should recognise that expression from somewhere... someone else. But she was also asking herself what his response had meant. He had instigated the kiss, but had not accepted her invitation to make it a more passionate exchange, instead settling for a brief touch. And the way he had caressed her face... there had been something unbearably tender about that. But was any of his behaviour lover-like, or was it a silent apology for his inability to offer her anything more?

She had to know. "Superman?" Her tone was soft, questioning.

Clark stirred slightly; he had known she would want more from him. "Lois, I'm sorry. I do care about you - I told you that before, and nothing's changed since then. But... Superman cannot become romantically involved with anyone. It's just too dangerous." No, Superman can't, Clark justified his excuse to himself - but Clark can. And Clark would love to become romantically involved with you, Lois...

"Superman, this situation we're in... we may not get out of it alive," Lois prompted softly. "Why shouldn't we make the most of what time we have left?" She raised her face towards his again, inviting his kisses.

Clark was tempted; the sight of Lois's beautiful face raised in invitation was almost more than he could bear. He lowered his head towards hers, but at the last minute his lips brushed her forehead instead. "I know, but still... Lois, it's just not a good idea. I... can't."

Why not, she demanded silently.

Oh, Lois, you just don't know how much I want to take you in my arms, crush you against me, and kiss you until neither of us have breath left in our bodies. I want... I *\*need\** to tell you how much I love you, how my body and my soul have yearned for you since the moment I saw you. But I'm afraid... I can't tell you how I feel without telling you the truth.

And as long as there was the slightest chance that they might escape alive from their prison, Clark thought, he couldn't bear to take the risk of telling Lois who she was really with. He told himself that he had no idea how she would react; but then he admitted to himself that he did have an inkling. She would be hurt; she would accuse him of deceiving her into believing that he was two different people; she would suggest that he had taken advantage of her in her ignorance, and perhaps even that he had been laughing at her behind her back for her infatuation with Superman. Yet none of this was true; if she could only understand it, she was the one who could laugh at him. In creating a secret identity for himself, and in indulging himself by spending time with Lois in that identity, he had only made himself more miserable, and his love for Lois seemed to be more hopeless. Superman, supposedly intended to allow Clark Kent to enjoy a normal life, appeared to be the biggest obstacle in the way of his actually having that normal life, with the woman he loved.

But how do you *\*know\** she would react like that? his conscience asked him. You could try to explain - and let's face it, she can't exactly walk away or refuse to listen while you're both trapped down here. It's the perfect opportunity - and if you do manage to get out alive, you have the chance to start afresh with her. You *\*do\** trust her with your secret, don't you?

Clark admitted to himself that he knew Lois wouldn't rush to print his secret; however ambitious she was as a journalist, she was also loyal to her friends. He could trust her on that score. So why couldn't he trust her, as a friend and as the woman he loved, with the secret of his true nature?

Because you're a coward, his conscience pointed out. That's why you've never told her the truth, that's why you ran away from her as Superman when she put into words what you already knew - that she'd fallen for the disguise, and that's why you took back your declaration of love, as Clark. You're afraid to take the risk of opening yourself fully to someone else's scrutiny, to risk that you might get hurt. It's much easier to love from a distance than to take the risk of a real, flesh-and-blood relationship, where secrets and hopes and fears have to be exposed and shared.

Maybe I am a coward, Clark muttered silently to himself. But it's safer...

He felt Lois pull away from him, and turned towards her in time to see the hurt and rejection on her face. Instantly he felt stricken with guilt. She, with the memory of his previous rejection fresh in her mind, had taken the risk of making the first move, offering her sweet, warm mouth to him. He had rejected her again, without any explanation or justification. His conscience was right - he was a coward.

He shifted, and tightened his arm around her shoulders. "Lois, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. And I want you to know that I do find you attractive. But that doesn't change the fact that you and I can't have a relationship. I know that we're trapped in here, and maybe I should just forget everything I've tried to do to keep you safe from people who might use you to get at me - maybe we should just give what we can to each other in the time we may have left. But there's something inside me telling me that's the wrong thing to do. That's why I can't, Lois. And as long as there's some slim chance that we might get out of here alive, I won't give you any false hope that we could have something in the future."

Lois listened to Superman's explanation; at first she was sceptical, but as he continued she began to understand his point of view. She had always understood that Superman had a very strong moral code, a set of values much more rigid and ethical than most humans possessed, and she had loved him all the more for that. She wanted so much to spend what little time they might have left to them comforting and loving each other, and couldn't really see any objection - particularly since it was clear that he found her attractive. Yet she understood why Superman felt that it was wrong for him. In a way, she now understood what he had been trying to say to her that evening at her apartment: he couldn't have a relationship with anyone, and therefore, no matter how much he did care for her, she could never be more than a friend to him.

She smiled at him, therefore, and replied, "I understand what you're saying, Superman, and I want you to know that your honesty and your ethics are among the things I love and value the most about you." She traced the line of his jaw with her finger, enjoying the freedom to touch him as he sat holding her close to him. It was a freedom, she was aware, that she would lose if they did manage to escape from this place; something told her that he would take care to avoid being alone with her in the future, to ensure that they were never again tempted to allow the attraction between them to develop into anything.

Clark had winced inwardly at Lois's reference to his honesty, and he hoped she wouldn't notice his discomfort. He was well aware that his justification was only a small part of the truth; he knew now that he didn't want to be intimate with her in any way under these false pretences. He could only be happy about kissing her, touching her, holding her in the way she wanted if he told her the truth now, that he was Clark. And since he still didn't feel ready to do that, he had struggled for a plausible excuse. The half-truth he had just told her, together with his deception, made him very uncomfortable listening to her praising his values.

Then tell her the truth! his conscience urged. No, I can't, he replied silently. I don't want to take the risk that she might reject me - and if that makes me a coward, then that's what I am.

Feeling Lois shiver slightly, he tugged the end of his cape from behind him and wrapped it around her, pressing her head into the curve of his shoulder. Resting his head lightly on top of hers, he allowed himself to enjoy the sensation of holding the woman he loved in his arms, and attempted to ignore the voice of his conscience arguing that his deceit was incompatible with his claim to love her.

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Perry White replaced the telephone receiver and got to his feet, moving to stand beneath the portrait of Elvis Presley which hung near the door to his office. For once, he failed to see the King of Rock 'n' Roll's face, instead simply seeing the face of Lois Lane, his star reporter and the nearest thing to a daughter the Daily Planet's editor-in-chief had ever had.

Inspector Henderson had just called to say that Olsen's hunch had been correct: the layout of the Lexor's basement had indeed suggested that it might have been used for purposes other than storage of items related to the running of a hotel. The hotel's staff had been quizzed on what might have been kept down there at one occasion, but they had been of little help. One long-serving porter had remembered that on one occasion there had been a number of crates in the basement; he hadn't known what they had contained other than that it was not soft furnishings, alcohol or other hotel supplies. The crates had disappeared about a week later, but although this porter operated the service elevator, he hadn't seen them taken out. This had confirmed to Henderson that there must be another exit from the basement, and his men had eventually found it by using special equipment which had detected a passage behind a facade of brick. Not being able to find the means of accessing the passage, the wall and door had been broken down, and the passage had been searched. They had found evidence that it had been used recently, and had also discovered its exit, on one of the deserted back streets about a mile and a half from the Lexor. This street rarely appeared to attract the attention of the city's street cleaners, which was useful since fresh tyre tracks had been found in the road just outside the passage exit.

Impressions had been taken of the tyres, but all these had shown was that they were a very common make of cheap tyre which tended to be used on trucks or vans. Officers were now, Henderson had explained, asking around to see whether anyone had seen a vehicle parked in the street, or perhaps driving away, in the late morning. However, by the tone of his voice Perry had deduced that Henderson wasn't very hopeful. It was understandable; the streets around there mainly housed the rear entrances of downmarket bars and clubs, and there was unlikely to be much activity around there in the mornings. Down-and-outs who slept in doorways would have been up and about, in search of breakfast or supplies of alcohol, and the owners of business premises were unlikely to show up before early afternoon.

So the trail had gone cold; and Lois was still missing. Wanted notices had been issued on Nigel St John, but from what had been discovered about him since that morning, Perry was certain that he

was unlikely to be found. Henderson had volunteered the information that a police search had discovered St John had once worked for the British overseas secret service, but had been dismissed after being caught out in an unspecified double-cross. Someone like that would not be found should they want to disappear, Perry knew.

Was Lois still with him? Perry wondered. Was St John intending to use her as a hostage for his own safety and freedom, or had he already killed her? He didn't want to speculate, but as the hours went by with no news, he was unable to help himself. He was also aware that the Planet would need to be ready to run the story of Lois's kidnap, and he had already assigned two of the Planet's older, reliable reporters to put together the required articles. He would have preferred to put Clark Kent onto the story; it required someone with Kent's touch. But apart from the question of whether Kent could bear to write about his best friend's disappearance and possible death, the other reporter was still missing.

"I could do without Kent going missing today, of all days!" Perry muttered aloud, startling a junior researcher who was passing by his open door. The editor had grown accustomed to Clark Kent's occasional disappearances, many of which happened with no notice at all. He had no idea where the reporter went, but since most of these occasions were followed by a very good, and often exclusive, story, the editor had suppressed his curiosity. After all, he told himself, what did it matter if Kent had some sort of secret life or was spending his time moonlighting on writing his novel or whatever - as long as he kept turning in front page material that was all Perry needed to know.

But today... Kent was badly needed to cover this story, Perry told himself, while conceding that the real reason he was so anxious over Clark's absence was that he knew how he would react to Lois's kidnap. That boy would be frantic, Perry knew... he would be calling all over the city trying to locate his partner. He would be of no use whatsoever in the newsroom, Perry acknowledged with a wry twist of his lips - how could Clark work when Lois's life was in danger, when she might already be dead?

No, Clark would be combing the city himself, on his own or with Superman's help. And that was something else, Perry reflected. Superman was still missing; he had never shown up since he had gone to tackle the kidnappers inside the hotel. That he had gone into the hotel was clear: there was that smashed window where he had clearly broken in. But what had happened in that office? There was broken furniture on the floor, and a box with a small tarpaulin... what had that contained?

Where the hell was Superman, Perry wondered yet again. And why wasn't he out looking for Lois when everyone knew that she was the closest thing to a girlfriend that the Man of Steel had?

Sighing, the editor walked purposefully into the newsroom and demanded to see how far his reporters had got on the story of the hostage-taking and kidnap. He updated them on Henderson's phone call, so that the information could be included in their article.

Then, reluctantly, he called Jimmy over, and instructed the young man to pull up Lois's best work from the electronic archives, as well as her personnel file and the bio which was used for publicity purposes.

Then he retreated into his office, closed the door, and began, slowly and with immense sadness, to compose Lois Lane's obituary.

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The light from the dirty window was dimming; Clark guessed that it was probably around 6pm and that they had been imprisoned in the cold, evil-smelling sewer for about six or seven hours. They had not talked much over the past couple of hours, each lost in their own thoughts. Occasionally one or the other had begun a conversation, desperately in need of some distraction from the unpleasant nature of some of those thoughts; but for the most part they had simply held each other and gained comfort from the closeness.

Lois was very cold, Clark could tell; although without his Super-powers he was also feeling quite chilled he was still warmer than she was. He had done his best to keep her warm by, after a while, detaching his cape from the back of his suit and wrapping it around the two of them, thus warming her as much from his own body heat as the blanket-like effect of the cape. He also chafed her hands in his from time to time, and encouraged her to hold them against his side or between his thighs to warm them up. The sensation of Lois's hands on his body was uncomfortable, but he did his best to prevent himself from responding in any way to the sensations she evoked in him. The Suit was revealing enough without any involuntary responses below the waist, he knew.

His thoughts had drifted after some time to his parents, and his friends at the Planet. He acknowledged that it was unlikely that they would escape alive; he had a number of times stood up to stare out of the window in the hope that a passer-by might be alerted to their plight, but it seemed as if no-one ever passed by on that street, wherever it was. He had tried banging on the window again with the brick, as much in an attempt to attract attention as to break it; without success.

If they died down in that sewer, they were unlikely to be found for some time - if ever. In the meantime, no-one would know what had happened to either of them, which would mean a lot of worry for people for whom Clark would rather not cause pain. His parents would probably already know he was missing, if the news broadcasts had carried the story that Superman had never emerged from the hotel after going in to stop the terrorists. And Lois's family would know by now that she was missing, unless there was a news blackout on the story for some reason.

But if they died there, how would anyone find their bodies? It was possible, Clark reflected, that Nigel St John might see that as some part of his act of revenge; never to have anyone know what had happened to them. That certainly wouldn't have been in Luthor's style, Clark mused. The late and unlamented head of LexCorp would have gloated in the ultimate defeat of his adversary, and would have wanted to see the newspaper headlines declaring that Superman was no more. Therefore Luthor would certainly have arranged for their bodies to be discovered at some point.

Therein lay another problem, of course; while Superman would be found dead along with Lois Lane, what about Clark Kent? Would it ever be known what had happened to him? Clark was aware that his absence

would have been noted; he suspected that Perry White had already left several angry messages on his answering machine. This was a big story, quite apart from the concern he was aware Perry would have for Lois's safety. He would want Clark working on it.

Clark returned to his puzzle: would a dead Superman be linked to Clark Kent? He had lost his invulnerability, so it would be possible to perform an autopsy on him - his father's prediction would have come true at last, he recognised with an ironic grimace. He probably would be sent to a laboratory and dissected like a frog. Was there anything they could discover from Superman's body to tie him to Clark Kent? Clark had never suffered from the usual childhood ailments, and because of the way his adoptive parents had found him - in a spaceship - they had tended to keep him away from doctors, not wanting to risk suspicion arising as a result of blood or other tests. Were there any fingerprint records on file for Clark? he wondered.

Or would his parents publicly claim him as their son? It was a possibility; and Clark almost hoped they would, since he didn't much like the idea of a grave and memorial simply to Superman. Clark is who I am, he thought miserably. I want Clark to be remembered - and I don't want my friends never to know what happened to me.

But, he thought, would his parents be safe if they admitted to having brought up as their own an alien child? If they were known to have deceived officialdom for twenty-eight years, to have pretended Clark was the illegitimate child of a distant cousin, rather than reporting his existence to the government as it would be argued they should have done? They could be prosecuted, he thought glumly. And even if they weren't, they would have the world's media on their doorstep for weeks, if not months. Their neighbours would be offered thousands of dollars for stories about Clark's upbringing; lies would be printed about all of them. Cranks would descend on Smallville, possibly even people like Jason Trask who would want to believe that his parents were themselves part of an invading alien force, or that they had at least aided and abetted the aliens.

No, it would probably be better if his parents kept his secret, Clark mused, even if it meant that Clark Kent's fate would never be known and his parents would be unable to bury their son. It was unlikely that they would be allowed to do that in any case, he thought; he couldn't see the government giving up its opportunity to find out about his physiology and genetic make-up. As long as no-one tries to clone me again, he thought grimly. It could be done, even if he had been dead some time by the time they were found; a lock of hair had been used on the previous occasion, hair which had been cut from his head some time before. The thought of someone - whether it was the government or some evil scientist working for his own nefarious purposes - producing another Super-powered individual made Clark wince.

Lois felt Superman's shudder and surfaced from her own thoughts to look up at him. In the dimming light, the bruises on his face were shadowed and his cut lip made him resemble a ruffian the like of which she wouldn't care to meet in a dark alley. She reached for his hand and squeezed lightly to attract his attention. "Are you cold, Superman?"

Clark met her searching eyes, dark brown pools of concern and

anxiety. "No, not really - warmer than you, anyway, I guess." He paused, then remembered that she would of course understand - she had met the clone which had been generated from his hair.

"I was just thinking about what could happen, assuming we're found," he explained. "Found dead, I mean." He stopped abruptly, realising that his words, and his apparent acceptance of their fate, might upset Lois, but she nodded, indicating that she wasn't afraid to consider the possibility.

"Yeah - I've been wondering whether we'd be found at all," she said softly. "I don't imagine this place gets many visitors." She paused, and grimaced. "I know I don't exactly get along with my family, but I'd prefer them to know what happened to me, rather than be left always wondering."

"I know," Clark agreed. "I think it's possible St John will make sure we're found. But what I'm afraid of is what might happen to my body. The chance to study Kryptonian physiology might prove too tempting..."

Lois gripped Superman's hands tightly, immediately understanding his fears. "Yeah - they'd love the chance to use you as a lab specimen! And... oh, God... cloning - every mad scientist and megalomaniac in the world would be after a piece of you!" She stared at him in horror, imagining the prospect of what could be done with Superman's genetic material.

"Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of too," he replied quietly. "And I'm as much afraid of the government authorising it as of criminals doing it." He paused again. "The only way to stop it - apart from throwing my body into the sun, which isn't much of an option right now, would be for me never to be found." He fell silent again, thinking. Lois simply held him tightly, wishing there was something she could do; the thought of what might be done with his body obviously worried him greatly.

After a few minutes, he enquired, "Lois, how big is that hole in the ground you found?"

She understood his reason for asking. "Not very, Superman - only about a foot in diameter. There's no way you could get down there."

"You certainly couldn't throw me down, if I was dead," he mused aloud. "Even if it was large enough, I'm too heavy for you. But I wonder... how secure is the ground around it? If I could dig a bit more away, maybe I could jump down myself..."

He made as if to stand up, but Lois let go of his hands and clutched at his arm. "Superman, what do you mean? Unless you think maybe you could swim along and maybe find a way out of here - "

Clark stilled and looked at her. "Do you think that's possible?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Maybe I should have thought of it earlier - there definitely is some kind of underground stream. But I don't know where it goes, and there might not be enough air or head-room to allow you to get out." She paused. "I'm smaller than you, Superman - maybe I should be the one to try it?"

Clark wasn't having that. "No, Lois - it's far too dangerous!"

"So?" she challenged, getting to her feet as he stood also. "I'm certainly going to die if we stay here! And if you do it, you might be even more likely to die than I am." She stopped abruptly, noticing the strange expression on his face. There was an odd, distant smile and a determined look in his eyes, and suddenly she knew.

"You \*want\* to die down there!" she challenged!

He hesitated, not wanting to admit the truth, but found himself unable to lie to her about this. "Not if there is a way I could get help to you, Lois," he said honestly. "But it occurred to me that if I'm going to die anyway, if I could manage to get down into that stream my body might never be found. And then there would be no cloning..." He trailed off, refusing to meet Lois's eye.

Lois blinked, and found herself trying to hold back tears for the first time during the entire length of their captivity. She couldn't bear the thought of his dying like that; even less could she bear the thought of him leaving her. "Superman... I understand how you feel, but if you did that I'd be alone..." It was her turn to trail off, as she wondered whether she was being selfish.

Clark understood her feelings. Of course she wouldn't want to be left on her own in this awful place. Forcing himself to be realistic about the situation, he concentrated on working out which of them was likely to die first. He concluded that it would probably be Lois, since she was smaller, less strong, and was feeling the cold far more than he was. In addition, he was aware that while he had no Super-powers, he probably still had some advantages due to his Kryptonian physiology.

He reached for Lois, pulling her into his arms and hugging her. "Lois," he murmured softly, in a voice which resonated with the depth of his feelings for her. "I promise, I will not leave you alone. If I do what I've suggested, it will only be... after..." He trailed off, finding himself unable to say the words after all.

After I'm dead, Lois silently finished his sentence for him. After all, I am likely to be the first to go... She pressed her body closer to him, drawing strength and courage from his strong arms and broad chest. Tucking her head under his chin, she held him tightly for several minutes. When he finally loosened his grip, she leaned back and raised her face to his again, unconsciously asking for his kiss. He obliged silently, and their lips met in a caress which was as loving as it was passionate.

Clark, in the midst of the kiss, recognised that it represented everything he had tried to resist earlier, everything he had determined he would not say or do while she was in ignorance of his true identity. But he had been unable to resist the silent appeal in her face, the unshed tears in her eyes as she looked up at him. It had been an incredibly emotionally-charged few moments, as each contemplated their own and each other's deaths. Ending the kiss gently a moment or two later, he allowed his eyes to meet hers, and he raised his hand to trail the back of his fingers down her cheek.

Lois, he promised himself silently, I will tell you the truth. You deserve to know before you... die... And you will die in my arms, if I cannot get you out of here alive. Whatever I have to do, I will make sure you do not die alone.

Unable to bear the thought of her death for the moment, Clark stepped back and asked matter-of-factly, "So where is this water-hole, then?"

But Clark's idea proved to be unworkable; rather than having been formed through erosion of the surrounding floor, as he'd hoped, the channel seemed to be artificially constructed. No matter how much he pushed or pulled at the edges, or battered them with his half-brick, nothing gave way. Lois was secretly relieved, although given Superman's reasoning for wanting to throw himself down into the water below she felt a little guilty for her relief. But the thought of his strong, proud body lost for ever in some underground, foul-smelling stream which might or might not lead to the city's sewers was too appalling to contemplate, as was the possibility that he might become fodder for fish.

What am I thinking of? she wondered with an impatient grimace. If he stays here he'll die anyway, and we'll both be rat-food within hours. And we might never be found. That possibility was equally grim, she knew, and she desperately tried to rid her mind of the pictures which kept flashing into her brain. She knew the place was full of rats - where they came from, she wasn't sure, but there had to be a way in and out for them, or they would die. She had also felt some unidentified creatures crawl over her legs as she had sat in Superman's arms; she had shuddered but attempted to ignore them.

The rats... She turned to Superman again. "How do the rats get in and out - or manage to stay alive? There must be air getting in here somewhere!"

Clark considered the question for a moment, before replying slowly, "I wondered that myself earlier. But there are a lot of rat corpses around here - that doesn't help the smell, as you can tell, so I'd guess maybe that they get in through that hole in the ground and then can't get out again."

Lois groaned in horror and despair, a sound which made Clark long to be able to sweep her up in his arms and fly her out of there. Knowing he couldn't simply made him feel even worse about their predicament. Instead, he put his arm about her shoulders and led her back to their place under the window; wrapping his cape around her again, he sat on the floor and held out his arm to her, indicating that she should come and sit beside him.

"We should share this, Superman," Lois protested, gesturing to the cape, but Clark shook his head. "I'm okay, Lois, I can manage. You're freezing."

She joined him on the floor, this time turning her body so that she was half-lying across him with her head against his chest. He wrapped his arms tightly around her, resting his chin on her head, and wished for the thousandth time that he could find a way to save her. No matter about himself; he just couldn't bear the thought of Lois

dying, especially the interminable, painful death she would suffer from exposure, suffocation or thirst.

Lois's mouth was dry; she would have given anything she possessed for a drink right at that moment. She even contemplated licking the damp wall, or trying to scoop water from the hole at the other side of their prison. All right, she knew that the bacteria would probably kill her - but that would be quicker than the lingering death she would suffer otherwise.

Trying to distract herself, she spoke again, her voice dry and husky. "Superman, I know how you feel about the use your - body - might be put to. But... I wondered, what if you took your Suit off and we threw it down that hole? It's possible that no-one would recognise you."

This was an idea which hadn't occurred to Clark; if his naked body was discovered, what would be thought? There would again be attempts to ID him through fingerprints, dental records, DNA samples - none of which would yield any answers, he thought. On the other hand, it was just possible that he might be recognisable as Clark Kent. Which would be all right - unless Nigel St John chose to reveal just who had been trapped in the sewer with Lois Lane.

"I'm not sure, Lois," he replied at last. "It might not be any good if St John tells the world I was here."

"Okay," she replied quietly, lapsing into silence again. Clark recognised that her mood had changed again. When they had first been locked in their prison, she had been afraid but determined; she had been the one who had tried to find a way out, and had at least found their window - for all the good it had done, he mused grimly. Then, apart from their discussion about his feelings for her, she had been courageous, refusing to show fear or despair. However, her manner had now become introspective, and he suspected that the prospect of their deaths was eating away at her.

He, on the other hand, was more or less resigned to his fate; his anger lay in his inability to save Lois. He was sad for his parents, who might never know what had happened to him, or who might have to suffer their grief in silence while horrified at what was happening to his body. But Lois's suffering was tearing him apart.

He tilted her chin in his hand and looked down at her with a sympathetic, wistful expression. "Lois, do you want to talk about it?"

Do I? Lois wondered. It's bad enough thinking about it... and I'm so thirsty, I don't know if my voice will hold up. But maybe it's better than just brooding...

"Oh, Superman..." she began on a choked sob. "I don't want to die!" His arms tightened around her as he gazed at her wordlessly. "I just keep thinking about everyone I care about... knowing they don't know where I am... knowing I'll never get the chance to say goodbye."

"I know, Lois," Clark answered softly.

"I keep thinking about... Clark," Lois whispered shakily. "I don't know why... I mean, he's a great friend and I really care about him,

you know? He's been really great to me over the Lex thing - and I'm really glad you haven't asked me anything about that, you know, Superman, because I'm not sure I could have explained any of it to you, I can't even understand now why I ever agreed to marry him... God, I'm babbling, aren't I?" She trailed off, looking down at the S on Superman's chest.

"It's natural that you should think about your friends, Lois," Clark replied, trying to keep his voice as steady and calm as possible. It had shocked him deeply when Lois confessed to thinking about him - he wanted to ask her what she was thinking, and why, and how she thought of Clark now... but he knew he couldn't. It would have been taking unfair advantage of her.

"Yeah, I know, but Clark... oh, Superman, I really I could just see him one more time! I don't even know what I'd tell him - maybe just thank him for being such a wonderful friend, maybe just say goodbye... I'd really love him to hug me just once. I never realised it before, but he is a very special person..." She trailed off again, closing her eyes as she rested her head again on Superman's chest, trying to visualise Clark standing in front of her.

Clark sat as if frozen. Lois was with Superman, so she thought - and she wanted Clark! Not because she was in love with him, it seemed - but she wanted him! Needed him - and he could give her what she wished for. All he had to do was to say those four words... Lois, I am Clark.

Surely, now, he could stay silent no longer, he reasoned with himself. If it would comfort Lois at all, he owed it to her to give her that comfort. He couldn't possibly justify deceiving her any longer. And what did it matter if she was angry with him for keeping his identity from her? They were going to die... it wasn't worth staying angry when they needed comfort and companionship from each other. It would ease his conscience not to have any more secrets from Lois. And, he admitted to himself, he really didn't want to die without being completely honest with the woman he loved.

He shifted slightly and tipped up Lois's chin with his hand again.

"Lois - there's something I need to tell you," he said huskily, in a voice full of uncertainty and love for her. He met her eyes with his, staring into the deep brown depths, trying to predict her reaction. Would she hate him? Would she refuse to speak to him? Would this prove to be the biggest mistake of his life?

It doesn't matter if it is, he told himself. I *have* to tell her now. I can't go on any longer without telling her. She deserves to know.

Lois's eyes were searching Superman's face. His voice, when he had spoken to her, had been so emotional, she had wondered what it was he was about to say. Some sort of confession, she guessed; he had sounded sad, and guilty, and afraid. Afraid that she would be angry or disappointed with him? she wondered. It was possible that he had decided to confess to his true feelings for her, she thought - she couldn't think of anything else he could have to admit to. In the course of the hours they had spent imprisoned together, it had been impossible for her not to detect that he had strong feelings for her.

The way he had held her, comforted her, kissed her, \*looked\* at her had all made that patently clear. Despite his argument earlier that Superman could not have a relationship with anyone, it was possible that, now they had both accepted that they would die, he had decided to tell her how he really felt.

She tugged one arm free from his cape and reached up to stroke his face with her finger, hoping to reassure him that, whatever it was he had to say, she would listen and understand.

Something felt different under her touch... Puzzled, she stared at him, and suddenly realised what it was.

Clark began to speak. "Lois, this is very hard for me to say, because I've been afraid for so long to tell you the truth..."

But Lois was no longer listening. She interrupted him, croaking excitedly, "Superman, your face! The bruises are vanishing!"

Even as she spoke, another bruise faded, and the cut on his forehead sealed itself as if by magic.

"...the truth about who - " Clark broke off as the impact of Lois's words sank in. "They are?"

"Yes!" Lois's voice cracked as she attempted to shout.

Clark focused on the wall opposite them; it gradually faded, allowing him to see the sewers beyond it. He lifted Lois off his lap and stood up; concentrating, he floated a few inches off the ground.

"My powers - they're back!" He stared at her in amazement and disbelief. She threw her arms around him, sobbing in shock and relief. He returned her hug briefly, then stepped back.

"Let me get us out of here." He spoke firmly, in his practised Superman voice, and crossed his arms in front of his chest in the habitual gesture as he thought about their best route.

"Stand back," he instructed, as he floated upwards to rest in front of the window. He hit it hard with his fist; it shattered, and glass flew everywhere. Lois winced as flying shards hit her, but she was oblivious to the pain of any cuts. Superman had his powers back, and they were getting out of there alive!

Clark drifted back down to the floor and picked Lois up in his arms, flying with her to the window. "It's not wide enough for me to fly out with you in my arms - not without you getting cut by broken glass," he explained. "Can you crawl out yourself if I support you?"

"Sure!" Lois agreed. Stiffly, she leaned forward and arranged Superman's cape over the broken glass, then reached through and balanced her hands on the pavement outside. First one knee and then another rested on the pavement, and she struggled to her feet, inhaling lungfuls of sweet, fresh air.

Before she had time to straighten, Superman was standing beside her, fastening his cape back to his suit. He smiled at her, a broad grin of relief and happiness. "May I give you a ride home, ma'am?"

Lois giggled. "I don't think I could make it on my own - I haven't a clue where we are, I've no money for a cab because I lost my purse somewhere - and I'm not sure any driver would let me in his cab in this state - and my legs don't seem to want to hold me up. So I guess I don't have much choice."

Clark smiled. "I guess we both smell pretty disgusting. Should I take you to your apartment?"

Lois considered; the desire to get cleaned up warred with her impatience to get to the Planet and file the story. She glanced up at Superman quizzically. "Do I look really bad?"

Clark grinned wryly. "Lois, much though I hate to say it, you look - and smell - like a sewer. Let me take you home, okay?"

She nodded, and a split second later she was in his arms and they were drifting skywards. It was a wonderful feeling, she reflected; fresh air, the sky, the freedom to move... life itself. She would never take it for granted again.

Clark was also silent during the flight, musing on what might have been. It felt wonderful to have his powers back - not just because their return had saved both their lives, but also because he now knew he would never take his special abilities for granted again.

A few minutes later, Clark flew in through the window of Lois's apartment, his precious burden still in his arms. He set her down gently, and she clung briefly to his arms.

"Superman... thank you. You saved my life again," she whispered, reaching up to kiss his cheek.

He hugged her warmly. "Lois, it was thanks to you - if you hadn't got rid of the Kryptonite, if you hadn't seen that my bruises were disappearing... I had no idea my powers were returning."

She stepped back and smiled at him. "Want to use my shower?"

He grinned before shaking his head. "No thanks - I think your need is greater than mine. And I have somewhere else I can go."

Yes... you would do, Lois thought. I wish I knew where... A thought struck her. "Superman, what was it you were going to tell me, back there?" She held her breath, hoping that her guess had been right.

Clark caught his breath, remembering what he had been about to do. Should he tell her now? He had made up his mind to confess, after all. He surely owed it to her, after what they had gone through together.

No - I can't! It's all different now... I don't know how she'll react...

He looked down at the floor, berating himself for his hesitation, but knowing that he just couldn't bring himself to speak the necessary words. He forced himself to look at Lois again, and said, in deliberately brisk tones, "It doesn't matter now. Lois, I need to go

- I have to find St John and his accomplice and hand them over to the police." He stepped backwards towards the window, trying to ignore the look of hurt on Lois's face.

As he flew away from her window, his conscience taunted him.  
'Coward... coward... coward.'

Yes, I am a coward, he thought. But I love her too much to risk destroying what I have... even if it means I will never know what might have been.

You'll have to tell her one day, his conscience retorted. Before she finds out for herself, and hates you for deceiving you.

Maybe... Clark admitted. But... not yet...

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Lois stared after the departing red and blue speck that was Superman, and sighed. What had he been going to tell her? She was sure that he loved her, and had been going to confess his feelings. Whatever it had been, it had been something momentous. But it now looked as if she would never know, and he would return to maintaining an impersonal distance between them.

If only I had waited just one minute later before noticing his face, she thought despairingly.

But a moment later she shook herself. There were more important things to think about right at that moment, first of which was getting out of her filthy, torn and stinking clothes. She padded into the bathroom, undressing as she went, and climbed into the shower with a sigh of blessed relief at feeling the warm water wash over her.

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In his office at the Planet, Perry White was close to tears as he attempted to write the final paragraph of his obituary. Lois had been missing now for most of the day, and according to Henderson the police were now very doubtful that she would be found alive. The theory was that St John would have killed her, dumped her body somewhere - possibly in Hobbs Bay, and there were plans to dredge it - and then made his escape somehow.

Lois... a lump gathered in Perry's throat as he thought of his star reporter lying dead somewhere. He supposed that he had always known she would end up on a mortuary slab before her time; after all, she took the kind of risks which should have killed her long ago. Clark was always berating her because of her apparently careless attitude to her own safety; he'd had to get her out of a few dangerous spots, and if it hadn't been for Superman there were at least a dozen occasions in the past year when she should have wound up as dead as Elvis.

But this time it looked as if she hadn't been so lucky. Swallowing, Perry looked around at the printouts Jimmy had brought him; articles by Lois; the picture of her winning her first Kerth for investigative journalism, the youngest reporter ever to win; the first Lane and Kent exclusive front page story, about the sabotage of the Messenger;

hastily phoned-in tributes to Lois from colleagues at competitor news organisations. He would miss that young woman, darn it - the Planet simply wouldn't be the same without her.

Clenching his fists, Perry cursed the MPD and FBI for asking her to go into that situation at the Lexor. They should have been more suspicious - they had had no right to put a civilian at risk.

Darn it, if St John had wanted someone newsworthy to take hostage, \*he\* would have gone! If he had wanted to kill someone in some sort of twisted revenge for Lex Luthor, why couldn't he have demanded Perry White - after all, it had been Perry, along with Clark, Jimmy and Jack, who had found the proof of Luthor's guilt which had been sufficient to set the police on him.

Taking a deep breath, Perry tried to force himself to return to the obituary - after all, he had the other articles on the hostage situation to check before they could start to put the paper to bed. Deadline was in just over an hour. He sank slowly into his chair again, hoping that he would have no more interruptions. He had already spoken to Lois's mother and father - separately - three times each, and Lucy twice, and he felt that he just couldn't face talking to them again. Feeling guilty as he'd done it, he'd asked the switchboard to transfer the call to Personnel if any of the Lanes called again.

As he began a new paragraph, the door to his office burst open. Perry looked up sharply; Jimmy Olsen stood there with a shocked expression on his face.

"Olsen, when I say I don't want to be interrupted, I mean I don't want to be interrupted, get that? Now get out of here and don't come in again unless you want to be picking up your final paycheck from the Planet." Perry's voice was like thunder; he was furious at the interruption, as much from his dislike of allowing anyone to see how upset he was as from his need for solitude. He turned back to his laptop, assuming that Olsen would slink away and close the door behind him.

But Jimmy didn't appear to be daunted by his boss's bad temper. "Chief, you've just gotta come out here... you won't believe - "

"Perry, I think Jimmy's trying to tell you I want to see you," a voice the editor of the Daily Planet thought he'd never hear again murmured from the doorway.

"Lois! How in the name of Elvis... I swear, I never thought I was going to see you again!" Perry jumped to his feet and ran to Lois, embracing her tightly. "Darlin', just how did you manage to escape from St John? And when? Where've you been?"

"Hey, Chief, give me some space and I'll tell you," Lois laughed as she walked to the chair in front of Perry's desk. "I gotta sit down - my legs still don't want to hold me up, which is weird seeing I was sitting most of the afternoon..." She explained, as succinctly as possible, the events following her capture inside the hotel.

"So Superman was there all the time? And he'd no powers? Jeez!" Jimmy was amazed. "I wondered what had happened to him - I knew he wouldn't

just disappear and let people down."

"No, he wouldn't," Lois agreed. "He's gone now to try to find Nigel St John, but he took me home first. Perry, I'm sorry I didn't come straight here to let you know I was okay, but... well, Superman did kind of suggest that I needed to get cleaned up first. You wouldn't believe the stink in that place - I had to wash my hair three times before I convinced myself I couldn't smell it any more. And the clothes I was wearing - I had to take them down and put them in the trash." She grimaced, then smiled. "But I'm fine, no real harm done - just a few scratches."

She got to her feet. "How long have I got until deadline, Chief? I have a story to write!"

Perry grinned; that was his Lois all right. "I'll give you forty-five minutes - now git!" He smiled as she walked proudly out of his office, and then returned his attention to the obituary on his computer. This won't be needed now, he thought, moving the mouse to delete the file. Then he paused and gave a wry smile. Okay, she had escaped with her life this time, but knowing Lois she would be rushing into danger again the first chance she got. He might as well save the file... you never know...

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Lois's eyes searched the small temporary newsroom, in anticipation at first but concluding in disappointment. "Jimmy, where's Clark?"

"CK? Dunno - we haven't seen him all day," Jimmy replied with a shrug. "The Chief had me call all over for him - see, we didn't know if he knew what had happened to you or anything. We knew he'd be worried, though..."

Yes, he would have been worried, Lois knew. And knowing Clark, the good Samaritan and faithful friend that he was, he had probably been risking his own life trying to find her. She sat at her desk and quickly dialled his home number, hanging up as she reached the answering machine. She then called his mobile, only to find it switched off, and finally his beeper. It beeped, but there was a strange echo... somewhere close by...

Slowly, she turned her head as she realised where the echo was coming from. Clark stood behind her, in his customary dark suit and colourful tie, a lop-sided smile on his face and his beeper held aloft in his hand.

"You were paging me, Lois?"

"Clark!" Lois jumped to her feet and grasped at his arms. "Clark..." She trailed off, suddenly unsure of what she wanted to say to him. He seemed to understand, however, silently taking her in his arms and hugging her close to him.

"Are you all right?" he asked eventually, his eyes searching her face as he released her.

She nodded, swallowing; she suddenly felt more emotional than she had been all day, even in the terror of believing that she was going to

die of thirst or hypothermia. Blinking, she spoke softly. "Yeah, I'm fine - it's amazing what a hot shower can do for you..." She smiled self-consciously.

"You know what happened, CK?" Jimmy demanded impatiently.

Clark reluctantly dragged his attention away from Lois; it had been a huge relief to see her again, to be reassured that she had suffered no ill-effects from their confinement in that dreadful place. She had a few minor cuts on her face, probably from flying glass, but otherwise looked perfectly healthy.

"Yeah, I heard all about it - I just came from talking to Superman, he told me he found St John's accomplice and handed him over to the cops. There's no sign of St John himself, though - the sidekick says they parted company somewhere over on the north of the city. He thinks St John had a helicopter somewhere and might have used it to get out of Metropolis."

Lois blanched. "So he might come after Superman - and me - again?"

Clark grimaced; that had been precisely his fear once he'd realised St John had managed to evade justice. "Maybe," he replied with more confidence than he felt. "But he's a wanted man - the FBI will be circulating his description all over the country. And Superman's keeping his eye out as well. And something else - Superman had the police check out LexLabs, and they found the remnants of the Kryptonite solution Nigel had used, so it's been destroyed. I don't think he'll find it easy to get his hands on any more."

"I hope not," Lois gritted.

"Anyway..." Clark said with a wry look, "I think I've got about twenty minutes to get all this written up for the Chief, so I'd better get working - talk to you later?" He was relieved to have an excuse to leave Lois for the time being; her open pleasure at seeing him had been very gratifying, but he needed time to readjust to being Clark with her.

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"Great stories, kids!" The editor was pleased, judging by the broad grin on his face. "The Planet's only been back in business a few days, and we're scooping the competition already!" His expression and tone changed. "Now you get on home and get some rest, Lois - you've had one hell of a day, and I need you back here tomorrow fit and well!"

Lois turned to Clark and grinned. "Feel like driving me home? The Jeep's here, but I'd just as soon be a passenger."

"Sure," he agreed, returning her smile. He offered her his arm in an exaggerated gesture. "Ready to go, partner?"

They travelled back to Lois's apartment in companionable silence. Lois, just rejoicing in being alive, was occupied in studying Clark surreptitiously. There *was* something about him, she thought. Twice now at crucial points in her life, thoughts of him had engraved themselves on her brain.

Superman was right; he and Lois could not have a relationship; it was crazy to think anything else.

Could she and Clark have a future together?

But he said he didn't love me, she reminded herself.

But she smiled secretly to herself. Whether Clark Kent loved her or not might be disputable, she thought, but it couldn't be denied that he was attracted to her. He had given himself away on that score too many times - even the previous day, when they had hugged and made up. He had released her quite quickly, but not before she had felt the tentative evidence of his attraction to her.

Perhaps it's worth working on, she thought.

But on the other hand, she reflected, it was only just over a week since the wedding from hell - perhaps it was too soon to be getting involved in another relationship. Perhaps it would be better to concentrate on being best friends - get to know Clark better first. After all, he wasn't going anywhere. She really wasn't ready to risk getting involved with another man again just yet, even someone as dependable and trustworthy as Clark.

Give it time, she decided. If it's meant to be, it will happen.

Oblivious to his partner's train of thought, Clark was enjoying the sensation of inhaling Lois's personal scent and listening to her heartbeat. This was another facet of his powers which he had missed while the Kryptonite was having its debilitating effect on him, and it was so good to be able to use his full potential again.

It was also good to be with Lois as Clark again; he no longer felt constrained to act in a particular way, as he had during their imprisonment. As Clark, he could joke with her, tease her, even hug her without wondering how she interpreted the gesture. As Clark, she would tell him her hopes and her fears, she would tease him, call him 'farmboy' and 'Mr Greenjeans' and 'Boy Scout', and she would trustingly cuddle up next to him on the sofa to watch a movie. So what if she didn't seem to want to kiss him the way she wanted to kiss Superman? Who knows, maybe in time he might be able to persuade her to fall in love with Clark. Especially if Superman stops encouraging her...

Should he have told her the truth? For a moment, Clark wondered what would have happened if Lois had noticed the fading of his injuries a couple of minutes later. Would they still be travelling home together in Lois's Jeep? Pessimistically, he decided that they probably wouldn't have been; it was very likely that Lois wouldn't be speaking to him.

I will tell her one day, he promised his conscience. Not yet... I want time to let our friendship develop first, to see whether there is a chance that she could love me as Clark and not as Superman. I have to know... otherwise I'll always be afraid that she chose the Super-powers and not the man.

So I'll give it time, he concluded. When the time is right... if it's

meant to happen, it will happen.

He pulled up outside Lois's building, steering the Jeep expertly into a parking space. As they exited, he handed Lois the keys and leaned towards her to brush her forehead with his lips.

"Sleep well, Lois - I'll see you tomorrow at the Planet," he said with an affectionate smile.

"Yeah, you too, Clark," Lois replied with a yawn; she had intended to invite Clark up for coffee, but she was just realising how tired she was. Better to leave it.

Clark paused as he was about to stroll off, and looked back at his partner. "It's great to have you back."

"Yeah," she replied, and then it struck her that perhaps he was referring to more than just today's events. "It's great to be back, Clark - Lane and Kent, the greatest team in journalism."

"Sure," Clark grinned, giving her a flash of white teeth in the darkness. "We make a great team, Lois."

In so many ways... and maybe one day I'll get the chance to prove that to you, he mused as he made his way home. Maybe one day it will be Lane and Kent in a life partnership as well as a work one... who knows.

"Oh Lois, it's great to be alive!" he murmured, startling a passing pedestrian. He grinned, and concluded his thoughts more silently. Whether I'm an ordinary man or a Super man, it's a great life, and there's so much to look forward to.

Roll on tomorrow, and seeing Lois at the Planet - the start of the campaign to show her how indispensable I can be in her life...

- The End -

- Postscript -

Apologies to everyone who thought three-quarters way through that this was going to be a revelation story. I decided that it made more sense not to have Clark confess his true identity at this point. First, by keeping the secret, this story could fit clearly into continuity, with 'Madame Ex' taking up a week or so after this ends. This also explains, BTW, why Nigel was allowed to escape - after all, he has to be able to resurface in 'The Phoenix'. Second, I intended this story to explain (to some degree) Clark's rationale to himself - however sensible that may have been - for keeping the secret at this stage, and for focusing on building his friendship with Lois in the early part of Season 2. It also - I hope! - explains how Lois, at the beginning of Season 2, seemed to have forgiven and forgotten Superman's treatment of her at the end of 'Barbarians at the Planet', and also to have reconciled herself, without any puzzlement, to Clark's retraction of his love for her at the end of 'House of Luthor'. I hope I've succeeded, and that you enjoyed the story! ;)

Wendy

End  
file.